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MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS

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Return Of The Licenses

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I know what you're thinking: Another issue of *Game Informer* with another Marvel superhero game on the cover. Over the last two years, we've shined the spotlight on Marvel's Miles Morales, the Guardians of the Galaxy, and now the Midnight Suns, a new superhero experience from Firaxis Games exploring the darker side of the Marvel universe. I'm a huge comic book fan, and I love seeing these heroes get their games, but my fandom has little to do with them making the covers.

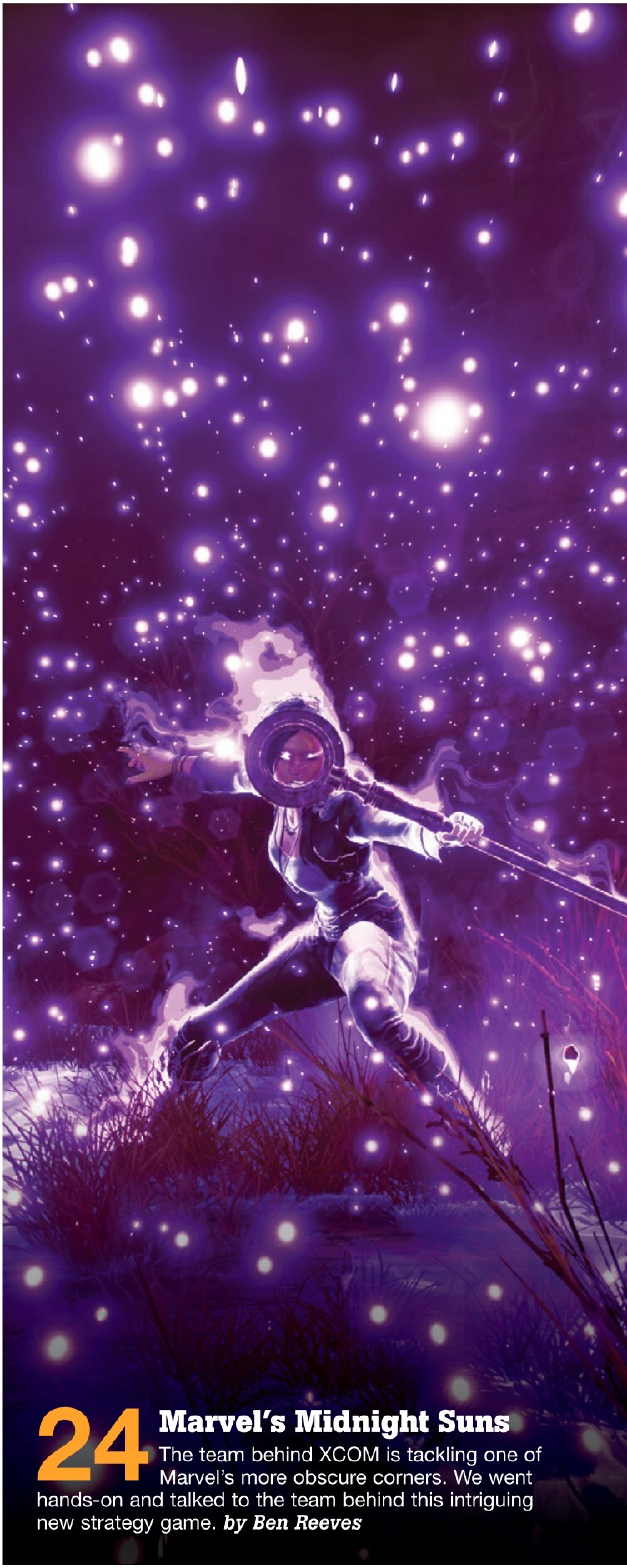
Each month we look for the game that stands out from the crowd, excites us, and deserves to have its story told in a big way. The titles held in consideration are often from the world's most celebrated development studios. What we are finding of late is many of these creative teams are partnering with big licenses rather than making a sequel to a beloved franchise or dreaming up a new universe. Insomniac Games and Spider-Man. Respawn Entertainment and Star Wars. Rocksteady Studios and Suicide Squad. Machine Games and Indiana Jones. The list goes on and on.

Most of these ventures into licensed waters are partnerships with Disney. Star Wars and Marvel are in the spotlight now but don't be surprised if Pixar and Disney animation properties join this chorus in the years ahead. Disney's strong reemergence into console video games is one of the biggest stories happening right now. Licensed games are back, and they are getting the respect they deserve. Gone are the days of a game hitting day-and-date with a movie. Each title I mentioned above is a unique creation by the development teams that start something new. It's the formula that made both the Batman: Arkham and Marvel's Spider-Man titles soar – a blueprint most developers are using.

Yes, I would love to see more intellectual properties and never-before-seen worlds, but I also want to interact with some of my favorite comic books and movies in new ways. I think we're going to get a good mix of both over the next few years, much like we did back in the NES and Super Nintendo days.

I can't wait for you to read what Firaxis is doing with Marvel's Midnight Suns. *Game Informer*'s exclusive cover art gives you a good look at the gold-and-black super team. This beautiful piece is created by comic artist Ryan Stegman and colorist Guru-eFX. Read the story, soak in the images, and let me know what you think of this exciting project. I may be wrong, but it feels like we're entering the golden age of superhero games.

Be safe. Be happy. And game on!



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The team behind XCOM is tackling one of Marvel's more obscure corners. We went hands-on and talked to the team behind this intriguing new strategy game. ***by Ben Reeves***

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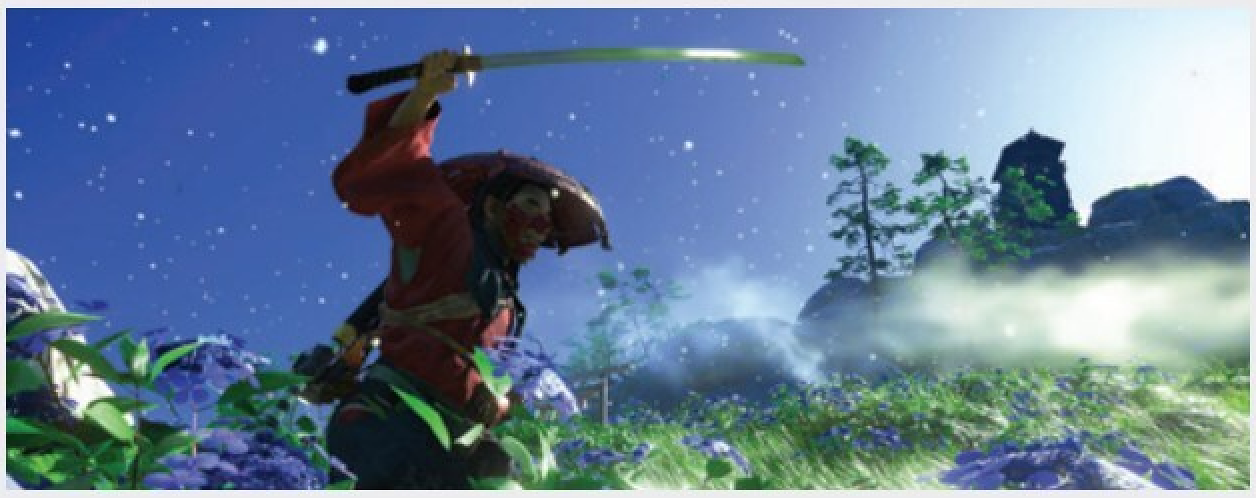
Activision Blizzard is being sued by the state of California for numerous labor law violations. Here's what you need to know.



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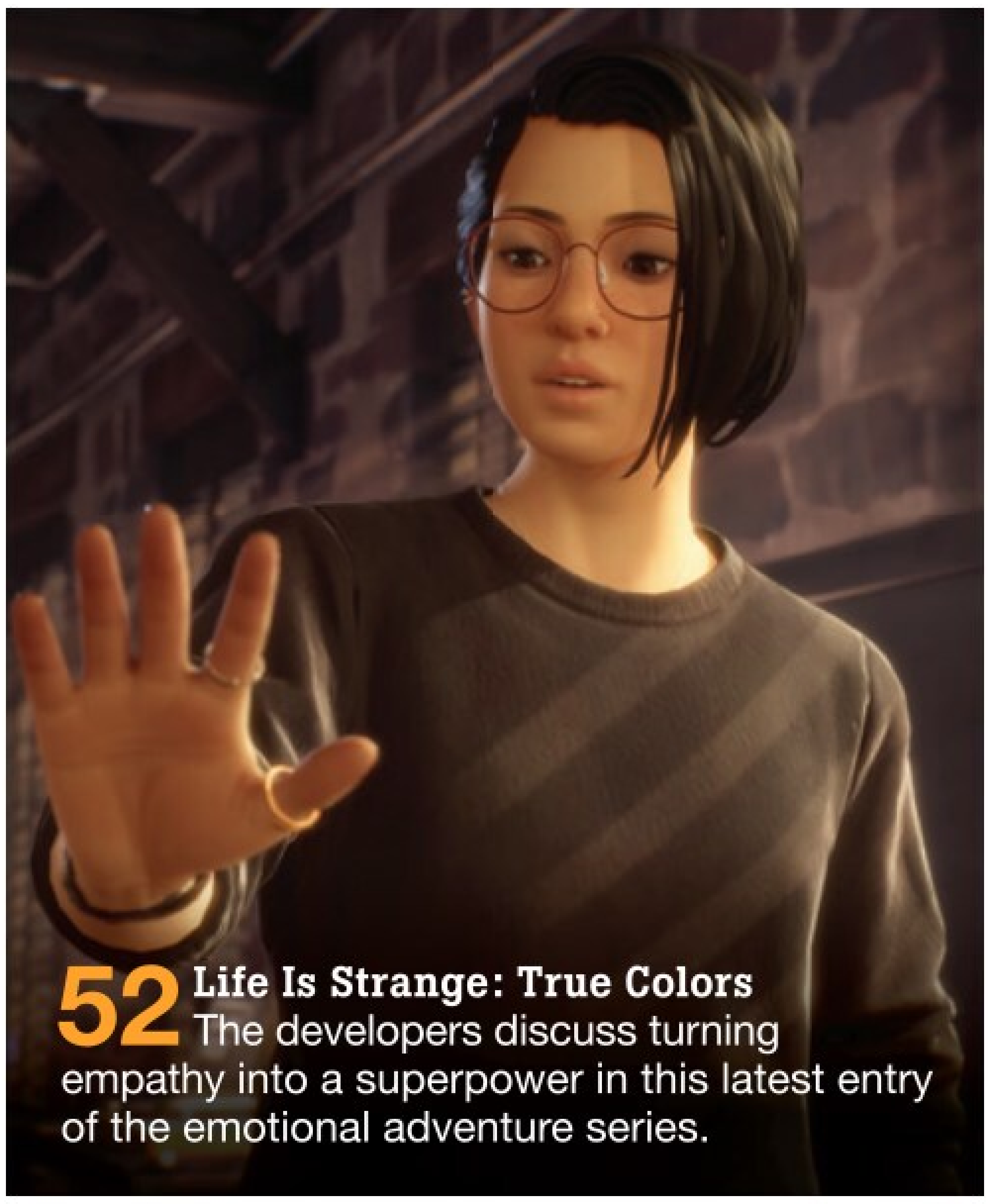

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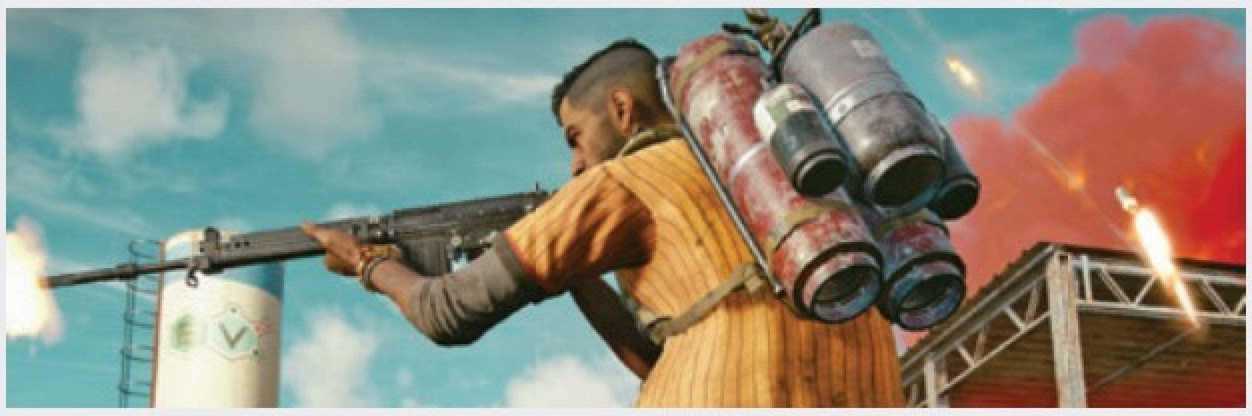
Our latest glimpse affirms what we hoped for: this is a major new direction for the franchise, and even includes riding some of the Pokémon we catch!



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Just a few months away, here's one last look at the open-world shooter before it hits in October.

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A multiplayer shooter inspired by mosh pits, just like the late author always imagined.

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Some of the original developers behind Dishonored and Prey (2018) are making a western; here's what to know.

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Blast your way through Heaven in this new anime-inspired shooter by the developer of Donut County.

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We played the new online multiplayer, and we're liking what we're seeing.

75 **Death's Door**
An adorable game about death, crows, and menial jobs, the new title by the Titan Souls developer is well worth your time.

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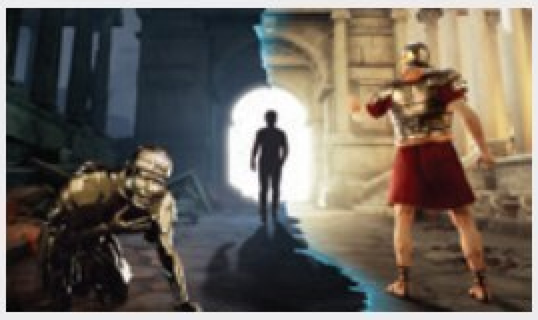
Long in development and anticipated by fans for even longer, Double Fine's newest action-platformer is finally here. Does it deliver after all this time?



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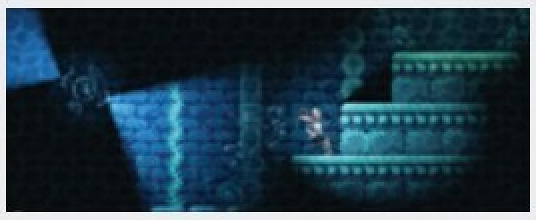
This full-game version of a beloved Skyrim mod is a narrative masterpiece. Find out why.



81 **Axiom Verge 2**
Thomas Happ is back with his latest Metroid-inspired adventure; the sequel dares greater variation from the familiar form, for both better and worse.

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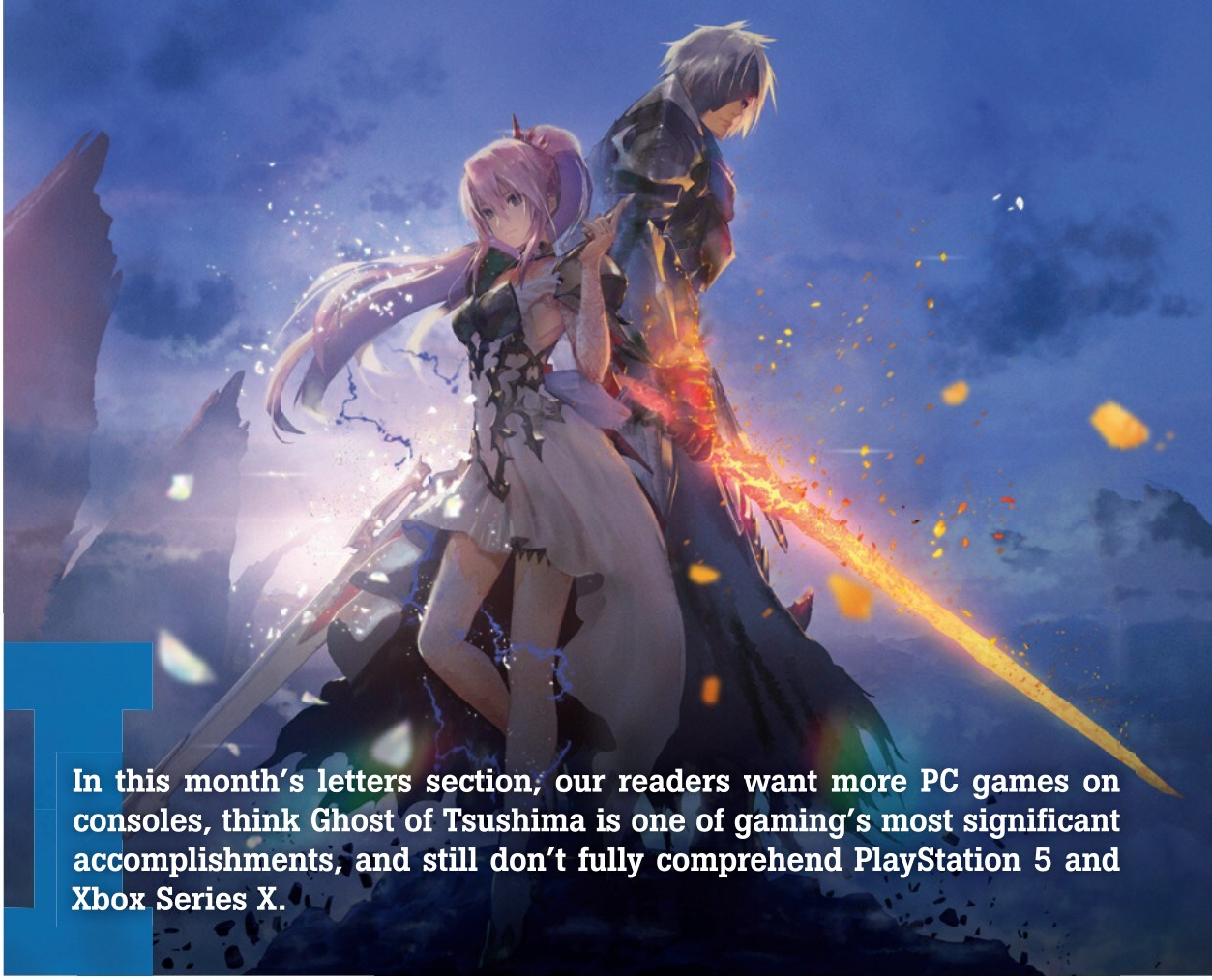


In this month's letters section, our readers want more PC games on consoles, think Ghost of Tsushima is one of gaming's most significant accomplishments, and still don't fully comprehend PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X.

Tales Of Arise

I love that you keep making magazines! I haven't missed an issue in 15 years, and the last year has been one of your best. Nothing will top issue 300 (well, maybe issue 400 will), but I've been pleasantly surprised by the games on your covers over the last few months. We usually get Call of Duty or another franchise with guns, but you show us how diverse and wonderfully colorful gaming can be. Kena: Bridge of Spirits, Psychonauts 2, and Tales of Arise are now on my must-play list. Tales of Arise sounds like an incredible evolution for the series. If I happen to enjoy that game when it releases, what would you say the next best "Tales of" game is that I can play right now?

Jakob Visalli
Orlando, FL

I took a marker and circled all the RPGs I want to play from this issue. Tales of Arise, Songs of Conquest, and Battlecakes look astounding! I usually play RPGs with my mother, and we always look for ones that have spoken dialogue, so we both don't have to read. Having to say "ready" or "okay" for every text bubble we must read is annoying. Does Tales of Arise have spoken dialogue?

Jenessa Hurley
Syracuse, NY

I've been telling my friends that they need to play the "Tales of" series for decades, and I'm glad *Game Informer* is joining in that chorus! JRPGs have been the best genre in gaming since the Super Nintendo. Final Fantasy was the game of choice, but that series evolved in ways that almost make it feel like something distinct, not an RPG. On the other hand, "Tales of" has been consistent. Yes, each installment in this series varies in quality, but they all feel like part of a unified vision. Tales of Arise sounds like the most ambitious entry yet with many significant changes. I hope it isn't going in the direction of Final Fantasy and keeps its soul intact.

Lana Robinson
Oregon City, OR

The future of role-playing games looks incredibly bright and offers a little something for everyone. Tales of Arise sits at the top of several *Game Informer* staffers' most-anticipated lists, making it an easy pick for last month's cover honors. We've played the game for a few hours. We can report it has extensive spoken dialogue for story moments but occasionally falls back upon written text for slower moments in towns and the overworld. Suppose you can't wait to play a "Tales of" game now. In that case, we recommend looking at the fantastic Tales of Vesperia, a game we deem the best in the series. One of the party members in Vesperia is a dog with human-like tendencies that smokes a pipe. You can't top that!

PC To Console

Do you think there is any chance that PC exclusive games start making their way to next-gen consoles? I am thinking of games like the Total War series, for example. Since mouse/keyboard are supported, and these next-gen consoles are more PC-like than ever, this would be a great time to try this out.

Shaun Steele
Virginia

For a game to be on consoles, it needs to first work with the native controller. You are right; many games offer additional control options, some even support mouse and keyboard. If Valve's forthcoming Steam Deck is booming, developers of traditional mouse-and-keyboard games may consider designing games with the thumbsticks in mind. We love the idea of Steam Deck and hope it turns the handheld market (and perhaps PC to console) on its head.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Getting A Job Writing Game Reviews

Hello. I've been a massive fan of *Game Informer* since I was a child. Recently, I've become more interested in writing reviews or even my impressions of video games. I'm not sure how to get started, though. How did any of the reviewers at *Game Informer* land their current jobs? Are there any recommendations you could give me?

Sydney Hyligar
via email

Getting into games writing is a combination of knowledge, talent, and luck. You can't do much about that last one, but you can certainly work to improve your chances if luck ever comes knocking. Study writing and journalism to get your written analysis skills up to snuff. Observe the industry and its games, and examine the stories and people behind them. Finally, start thinking about the games you play from a critical perspective. Worry less about scoring them at first, and instead focus on your perceptions and why a given game provokes those feelings. Look at the game for what it is, then put those positive and negative ideas into words. Getting your writing into the world is also crucial; we recommend starting a personal blog or YouTube channel and freelancing for the various video game outlets that pay writers for their work. We wish you the best of luck in your writing pursuits!

Ghost of Tsushima

I play every Sony-made game that comes out and usually enjoy most of them. They are all of the highest quality and often push the boundaries of what we can expect from games. The Sony titles I hear the most about are God of War and The Last of Us, but I think Ghost of Tsushima is Sony's masterpiece. It was so freeing and rewarding at every turn. Never have I been so satisfied by an open-world game. It also made me dive into the history books to learn more about the Mongolian invasion and Japanese folklore. Hats off on a great game, Sony!

Michael Miller
Rockford, IL

Sony publishes Ghost of Tsushima, but Sucker Punch Productions is the developer – the same studio behind the Sly Cooper and Infamous series. By no means are we short-changing Sony in its success. Sony has a big hand in bringing Ghost and all its first-party titles to life, and as you pointed out, has been consistently delivering top-notch experiences from all its development partners. Most *Game Informer* staffers appreciate Ghost just as much as you do. We'd love to see Sucker Punch use its open-world blueprint to bring other historical eras to life.

Attack On Titan

While reading your article about anime games, I was shocked that there was no inclusion of the Attack on Titan games by Koei Tecmo – more specifically, Attack on Titan 2. That game was an absolute masterpiece from start to finish, and it is easily accessible, as it is available worldwide on pretty much every modern console.

Of course, everyone has their own opinions, but in my opinion, this series was much better than many of the games I saw on that list.

Ryan Piper
via email

Another anime game recommendation? We'll take it! We had difficulty narrowing down our list but picked the ones our editors adored most. Thanks for giving our readers and us another game to consider!

Why Do New Consoles Exist?

I understand the reasoning behind the new-gen systems. The problem is that many people can't afford them, and they are almost impossible to get. I feel that people who can't afford one will get short-changed when it comes to new games. With games being made only for the new systems, people [who use last-generation hardware] will not be able to play upcoming titles like Senua's Saga or Plague Tale Requiem. I was looking forward to playing The Medium, but it won't work on my Xbox One S.

Mike
Plainfield, IL

We all wish we didn't have to spend money on new hardware, and that games would work on everything just like shows and movies can air on any TV, but hardware cycles are necessary. Each refresh pushes the video game medium to the next level and brings us into worlds and experiences we never thought possible. This new console generation is the closest we've seen to the TV analogy with games that straddle both past and present generations. As time goes on and more people adapt to the newer hardware, that link to the past will be severed. For the time being, most games work on PlayStation 4 or 5 or Xbox One or Xbox Series X/S.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"I went to one movie, ate at two restaurants, started to feel normal again, and now I enter lockdown again. The last time this happened, we had a new Animal Crossing game to put a smile on our faces. What game can do that for us this time, *GI*?"

For 2021, Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart and It Takes Two are continual joys. We're hoping Far Cry 6, Halo Infinite, and Battlefield 2042 bring plenty of excitement and longevity in the coming months.

"What's the one video game-branded food product that you wish would never go away?"

Pokémon sugary and marshmallow-filled cereal is delicious and, dare we say, gives Lucky Charms a run for its money!

"Where are all the Lego games? My brother used to play nothing but them!"

There has been a bit of a dry spell lately, especially after getting two to three Lego games a year, but Lego Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga is on the way soon.

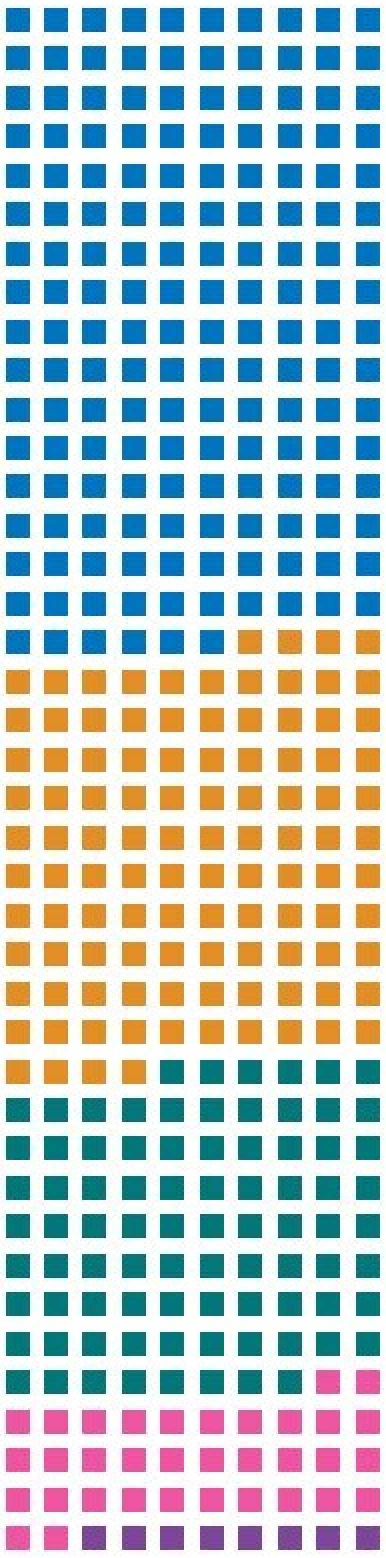
Best Comment:

"If you all give Returnal Game of the Year, I'm returning your magazine."

Question Of The Month:

Do you think Steam Deck will be as successful in the handheld space as Switch?

On Your Mind



- 🟦 Are excited about Switch OLED
- 🟧 Spend most of their time in competitive online games
- 🟩 Want Horizon: Forbidden West
- 🟥 Participated in the Halo Infinite beta test
- 🟪 Are wondering if VR gaming is dead

An Old Hope

Why doesn't BioWare and Disney want to rake in millions? Make Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic III, and bring Star Wars: The Old Republic to consoles.

Anonymous
via email

We wouldn't mind seeing The Old Republic migrate over, but those odds seem unlikely at this point in the game's lifecycle. KOTOR III seems like easy money, yet it's also a longshot after Lucasfilm's decision to restart Star Wars' expanded universe, meaning those first two KOTOR stories likely never happened.

Souls-Like

What makes a game Souls-like? I hear this term thrown around so much these days that I'm beginning to feel everything is "Souls-like." Before Dark Souls, what was From Software's inspiration? Castlevania, maybe? Speaking of which, I think it's high time we got a new Castlevania title. This is where From Software comes in. Konami should hand the keys over to the developers behind Dark Souls and see what they can do with their iconic franchise.

OG (Original Gamer)
Sin City, NV

In many ways, the Souls series is an evolution of another From Software franchise – King's Field. Taking a dark fantasy core, focusing on tight, third-person combat, intimidating bosses, and deadly environments inviting players to explore took From Software to the next level. Today, while there is no accepted definition of a Souls-like, these games often feature combat-centric, action-RPG elements, including resources lost on death. There's actually a new Castlevania coming out on Apple Arcade, with some of the original developers attached. But your idea of From Software tackling a Castlevania game is about as good as they come. Make it happen, From and Konami!

Reader Responses

Last month we asked our readers if a game has taken over their lives and become an obsession. Here's what they had to say …

I'd have to say Monster Hunter: World. It was the first game where I racked up over a thousand hours of playing. Just one more hunt!

Preston S.
via email

When I first played Batman: Arkham Asylum, I couldn't sit the controller down – I was having too much fun. I ended up playing it in a single sitting! I can't wait for the next game to come out.

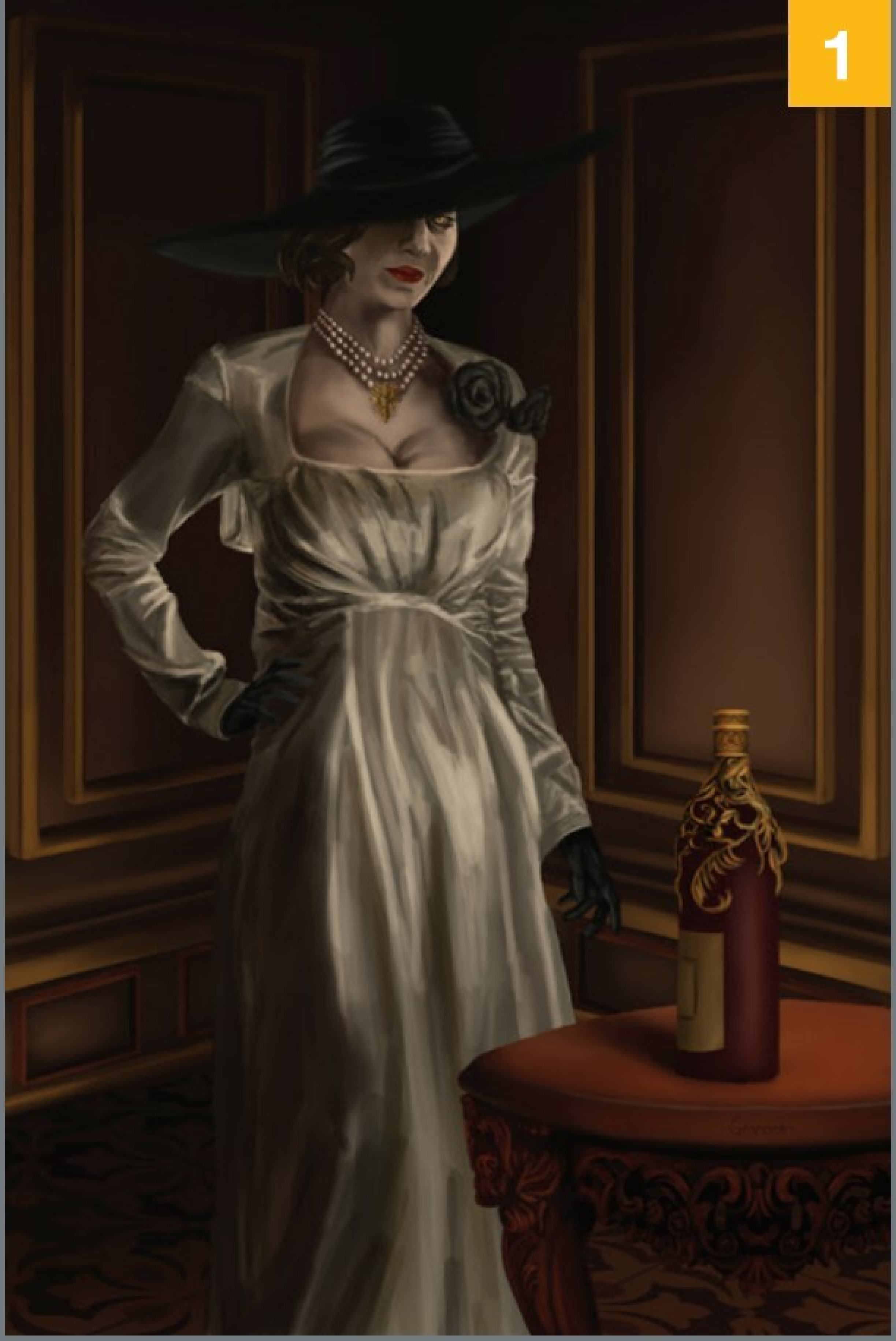
Nico Gonzales
via email

My wife and I play World of Warcraft almost every night. We sit next to each other and talk each other's ear off as we slay bosses and level up. We both work, socialize a bunch, but just play this one game when most other couples watch TV together. Our obsession is no different.

Tyler O'Connor
Bellingham, WA

I play Pokémon Go whenever I take my phone out of my pocket, which must be at least a dozen times a day. I'm level 40 and roll with a dedicated group of raiders. I didn't know any of them before I started playing the game, and now they are some of my closest friends.

Carly Coolidge
Shreveport, LA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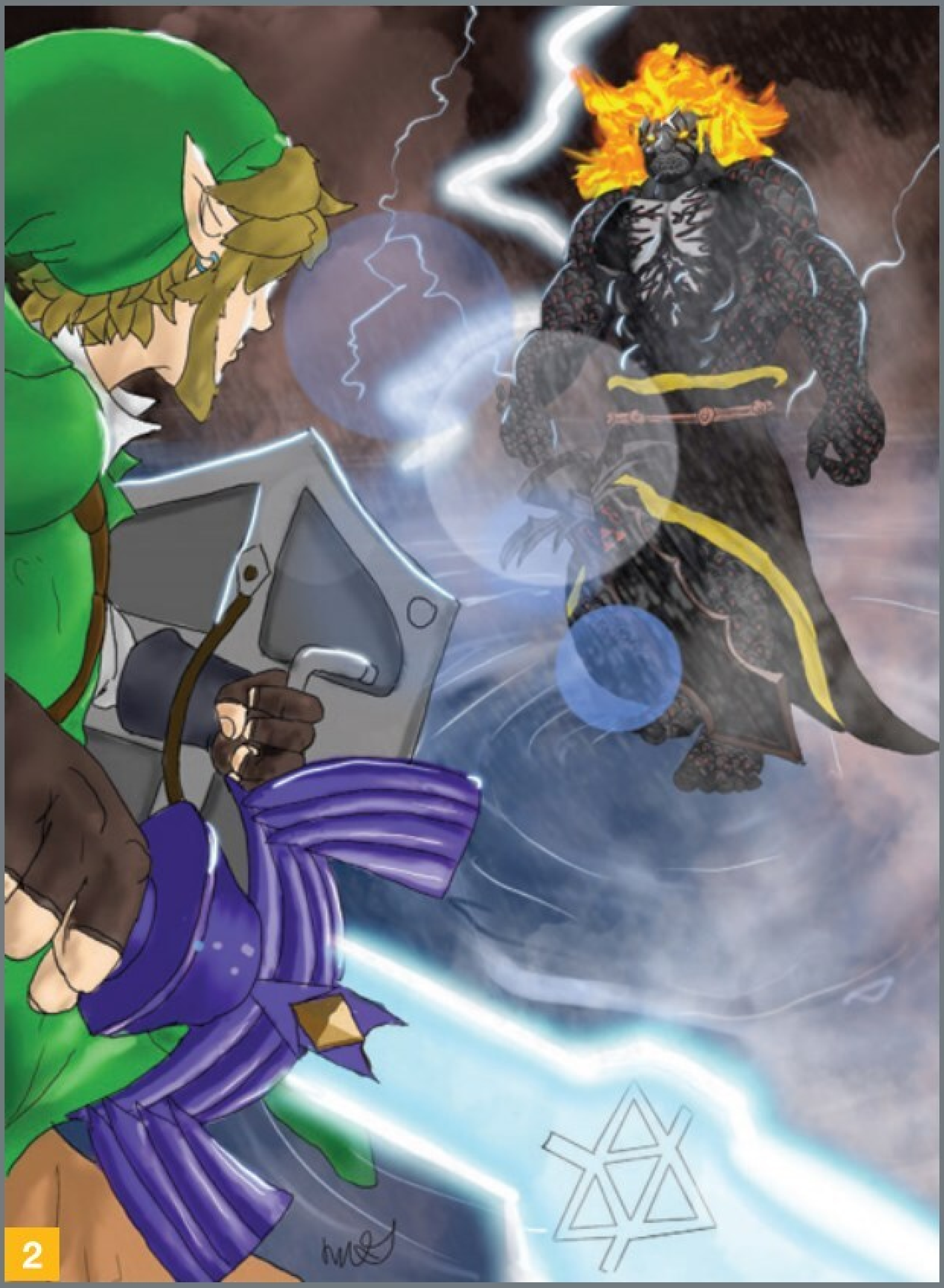
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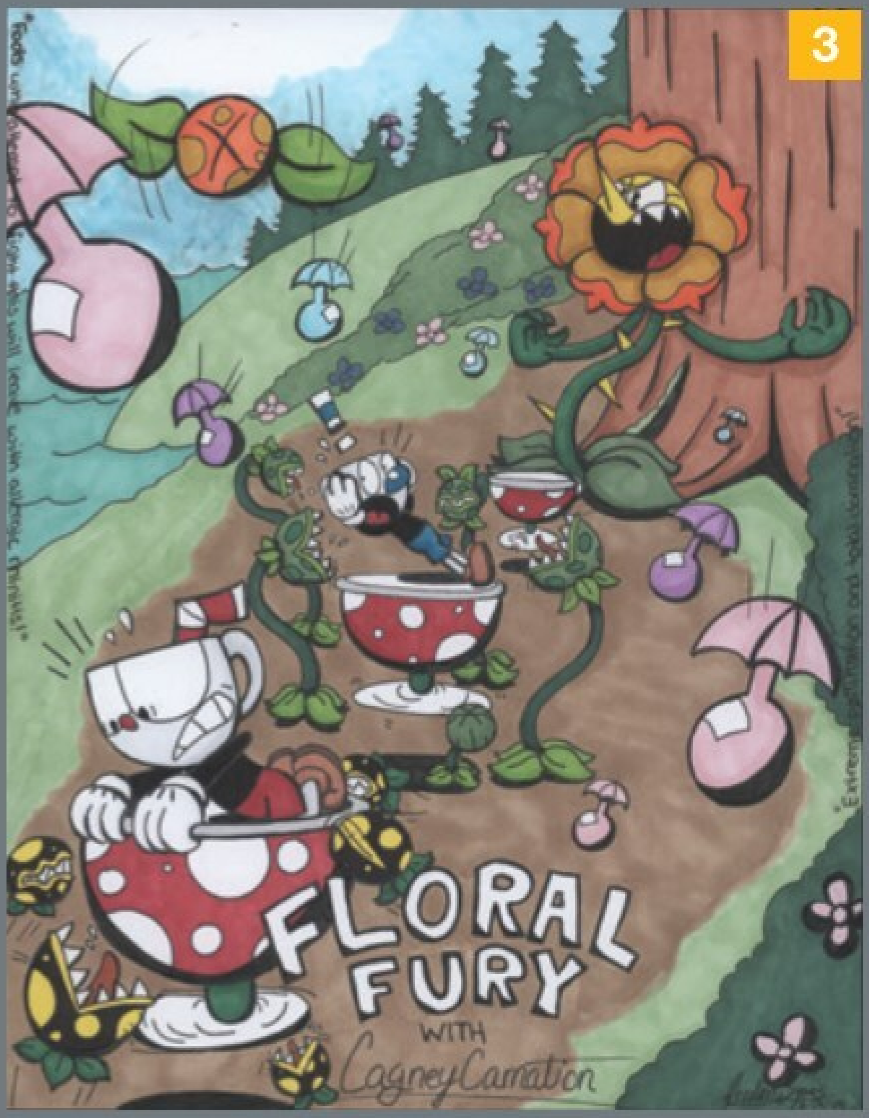
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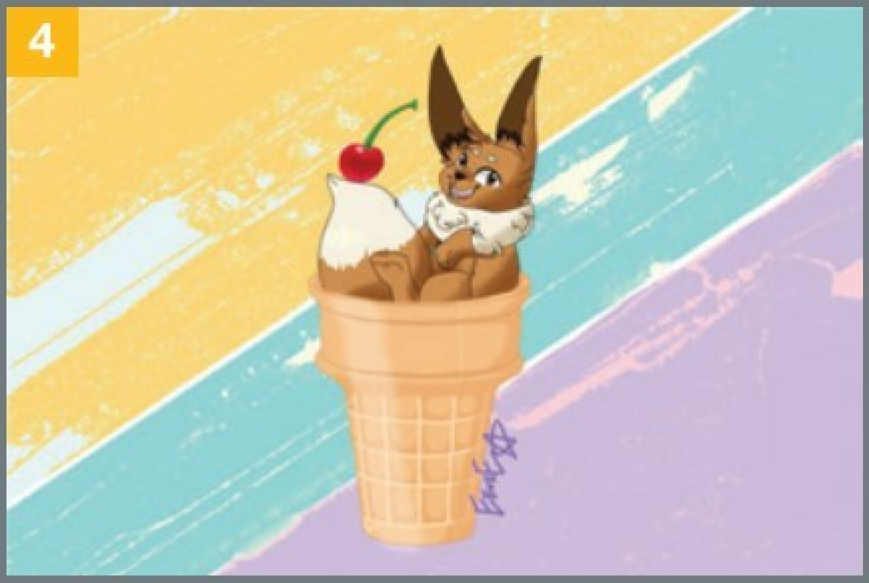
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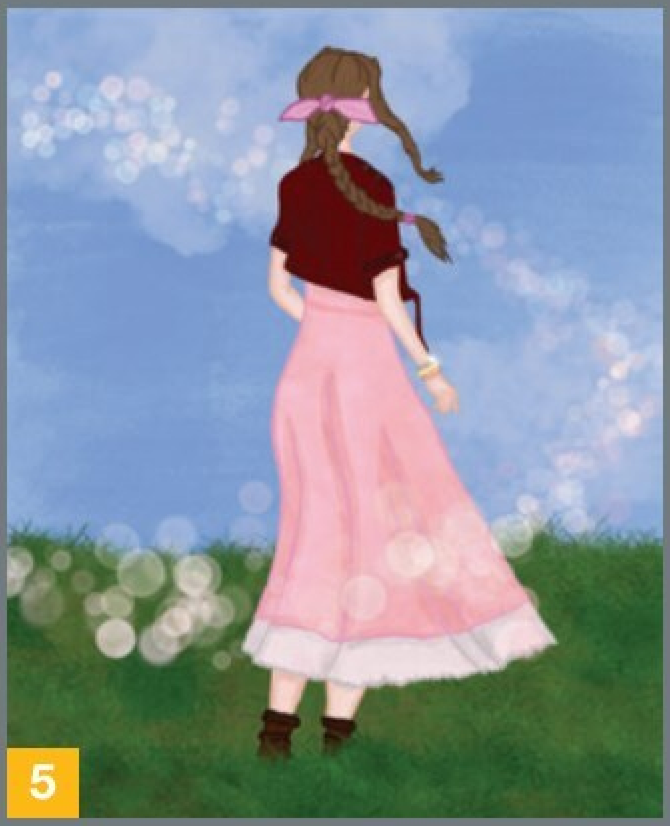
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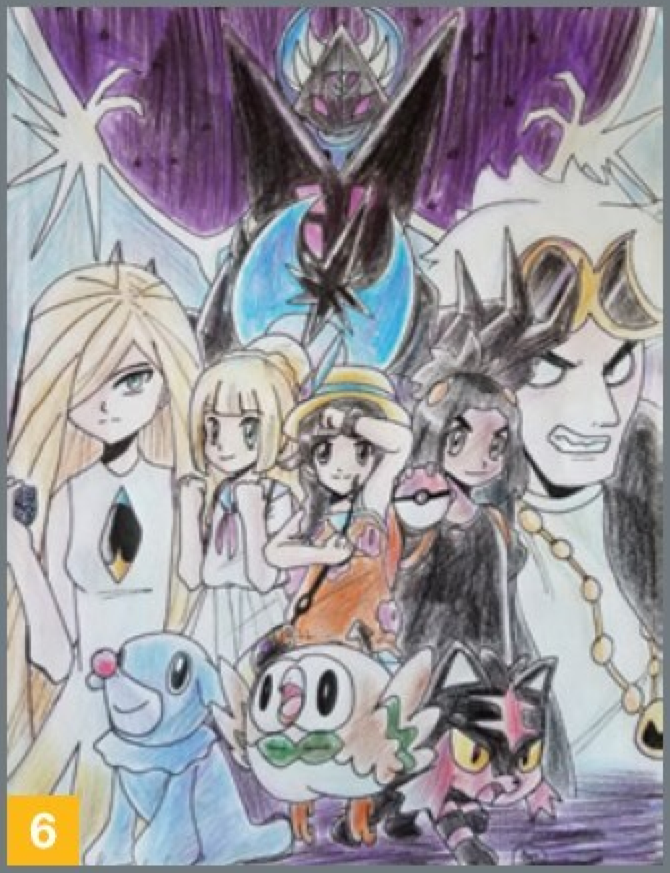
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WINNER

1 Gevork Sherbetchyan
This blind date looks like it's off to a good start.

2 Mitchel Garson
The attention to detail in this picture is scary. Or maybe it's just Demise who's scary.

3 Jordan Symes
Of course, gardening is one of the most dangerous hobbies in Cuphead.

4 Yvonne Benavides
I scream, you scream, we all scream because someone is trying to eat Eevee!

5 Gracie Koeppen
No one could hope to match Aerith in a bubble-blowing contest.

6 Madison Enebrad, Age 13
Okay, everyone gather around for the picture and say, "I want to be the very best!"

Submit your art for a chance to win a prize! Please include your name and email address.
Submissions may be showcased in our magazine and/or on social media. Email to: ReaderArt@gameinformer.com

Crisis At Activision Blizzard

An overview of the Activision Blizzard lawsuit and its fallout

by Jill Grodt

O

On July 20, the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH) filed a lawsuit against Activision Blizzard. With this lawsuit, the State of California seeks to address various labor law violations, including pay discrimination, sexual harassment, and workplace retaliation, uncovered during a two-year investigation. These violations primarily impact the company's female employees. After Activision and Blizzard merged in 2008, the publisher became one of the biggest in the world. The company works on several franchises, including Call of Duty, World of Warcraft, Diablo, and Overwatch.

The lawsuit contends that Activision Blizzard's "frat boy" work culture and discriminatory practices have created a hostile environment for its female workforce, backed by statistics and personal employee reports. According to the DFEH, women hired at Activision Blizzard were consistently offered less money than men in similar positions, afforded fewer opportunities, overlooked for promotions in favor of their male co-workers, and, by management's failure to rectify these issues, forced to seek other employment in higher numbers. The legal proceedings also indicate only about 20 percent of Activision Blizzard employees are women. The case suggests this represents a clear, unlawful pattern of behavior and calls the company's practices "willful, malicious, fraudulent, and oppressive."

The workplace discrimination women encounter at Activision Blizzard extends beyond hiring and compensation, the DFEH argues. The lawsuit details several accounts of female employees facing sexual harassment and grossly inappropriate behaviors. Many described hearing explicit or demeaning comments about women, female bodies, or rape, especially during so-called "cube crawls" – defined as a practice wherein some male employees would drink while going from cubicle to cubicle. Others recalled instances of unwanted physical attention such as groping at company events and other unwelcome advances.

In some instances, the DFEH found senior staff members would take part in this behavior. The lawsuit names former World of Warcraft senior creative director Alex Afrasiabi specifically, claiming that he would attempt to kiss the female staff and, on one occasion, only stopped his unwanted behavior because a supervisor intervened. The complaint mentions his room at one of the company's yearly BlizzCon events, was named after Bill Cosby, an actor accused of sexually assaulting numerous women. At this point, the suit also claims that the leadership team, like the then-president of Blizzard Entertainment, J. Allen Brack, did not put effective systems in place to stop this kind of harassment. Seeking to demonstrate the extent of Activision Blizzard policies' damage, the DFEH relates how one female employee, who previously endured intense sexual harassment, took her own life on a business trip, as detailed in an initial report on the lawsuit by *Bloomberg* on July 21.

Activision Blizzard executives' initial response to news of the lawsuit spreading varied noticeably. Brack declared harassment is "completely unacceptable." Executive Frances Townsend's message claimed the suit "presented a distorted and untrue picture of our company," a message echoed by the original statement *Game Informer* received regarding the lawsuit. At the same time, the public discourse surrounding the case started gaining momentum. Former and current Activision Blizzard staff members shared their personal experiences at the company on social media. The World of Warcraft community began protesting in-game references to alleged abusers. One particular video of BlizzCon 2010 even went viral. It shows World of Warcraft developers – including Brack – mocking a female fan when she asked the panel to introduce less sexualized female characters.

Eight days after the State of California filed the lawsuit against Activision Blizzard, a portion of the publisher's workers participated in a walkout. The protest was preceded by an open letter to corporate management that started making the rounds two days earlier, on July 26. The message showed solidarity with those who had faced workplace discrimination, support for the lawsuit, displeasure with the company's language concerning the situation, and distrust that the executive team had their workers' best interests at heart. By July 27, over 2,000 employees had signed the letter. Following this, CEO Bobby Kotick, who had yet to speak publicly about the lawsuit, described the original messaging as "tone deaf" and listed five steps the company would take to ensure the staff's safety in the future. His apology didn't stop the walkout. Its organizers demanded the company also abolish mandatory arbitration, make pay information transparent, create a more diverse-minded hiring process, and engage outside services for an audit of Activision Blizzard's leadership.

The fallout from the DFEH lawsuit is ongoing. In early August, Brack vacated his role as president of Blizzard and left the company, with the head of HR Jesse Meschuk departing soon after. Three Blizzard veterans – Diablo 4 director Luis Barriga, lead level designer Jesse McCree, and WoW senior game designer Jonathan LeCraft – followed suit the week after. The company's shareholders have also filed a separate class-action lawsuit against Activision Blizzard. They claim the company unlawfully misled them regarding its discriminatory practices and "frat boy" culture. It is difficult to say what will happen now, but the story will undoubtedly continue unfolding. ◆

We are covering this ongoing story at gameinformer.com with regular updates, where you can learn more about the many facets of this lawsuit and its aftermath

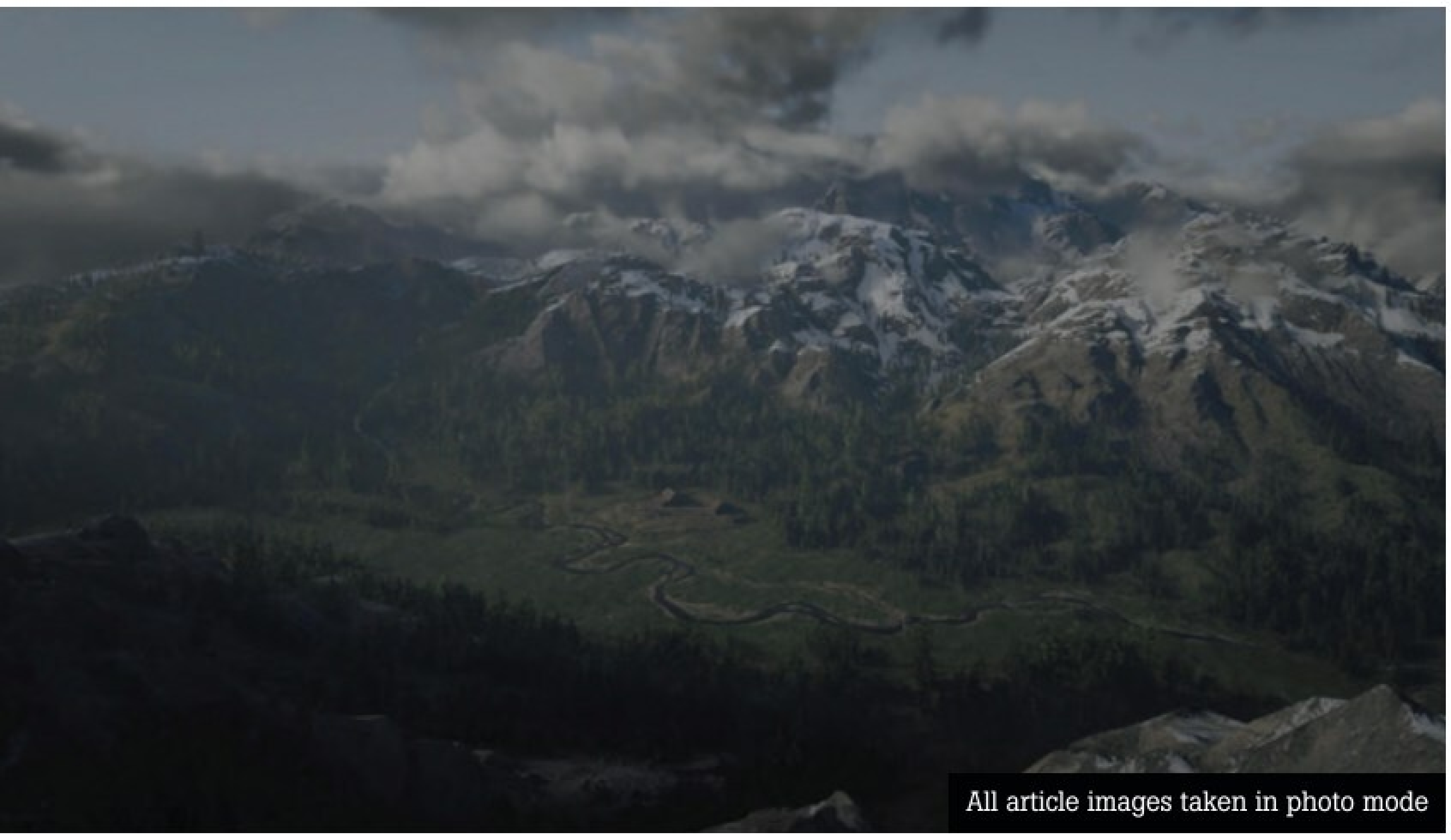
The Big Picture

Harassment and discrimination are not limited to a single company or incident. It's been a year since Ubisoft employees, especially in underrepresented groups, began speaking out about the corporation's toxic culture, and – according to an open letter to Ubisoft executives – many staff members don't feel there has been real change. Riot Games also faced accusations of systemic sexism back in 2018, prompting the DFEH to pursue years-long legal action. While the industry has a lengthy history of problematic and abusive work environments, heated public discussions around corporate injustices are increasingly prevalent and could affect the future of working in games.

Photo Mode Snapshot

Behind the lens of this increasingly popular video game feature

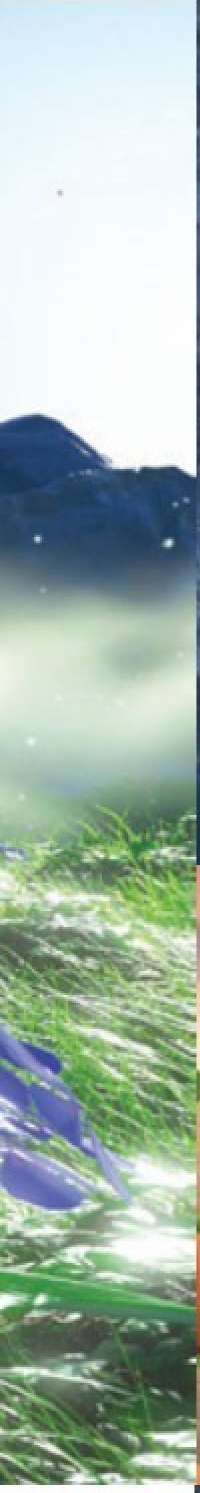
by Jill Grodt

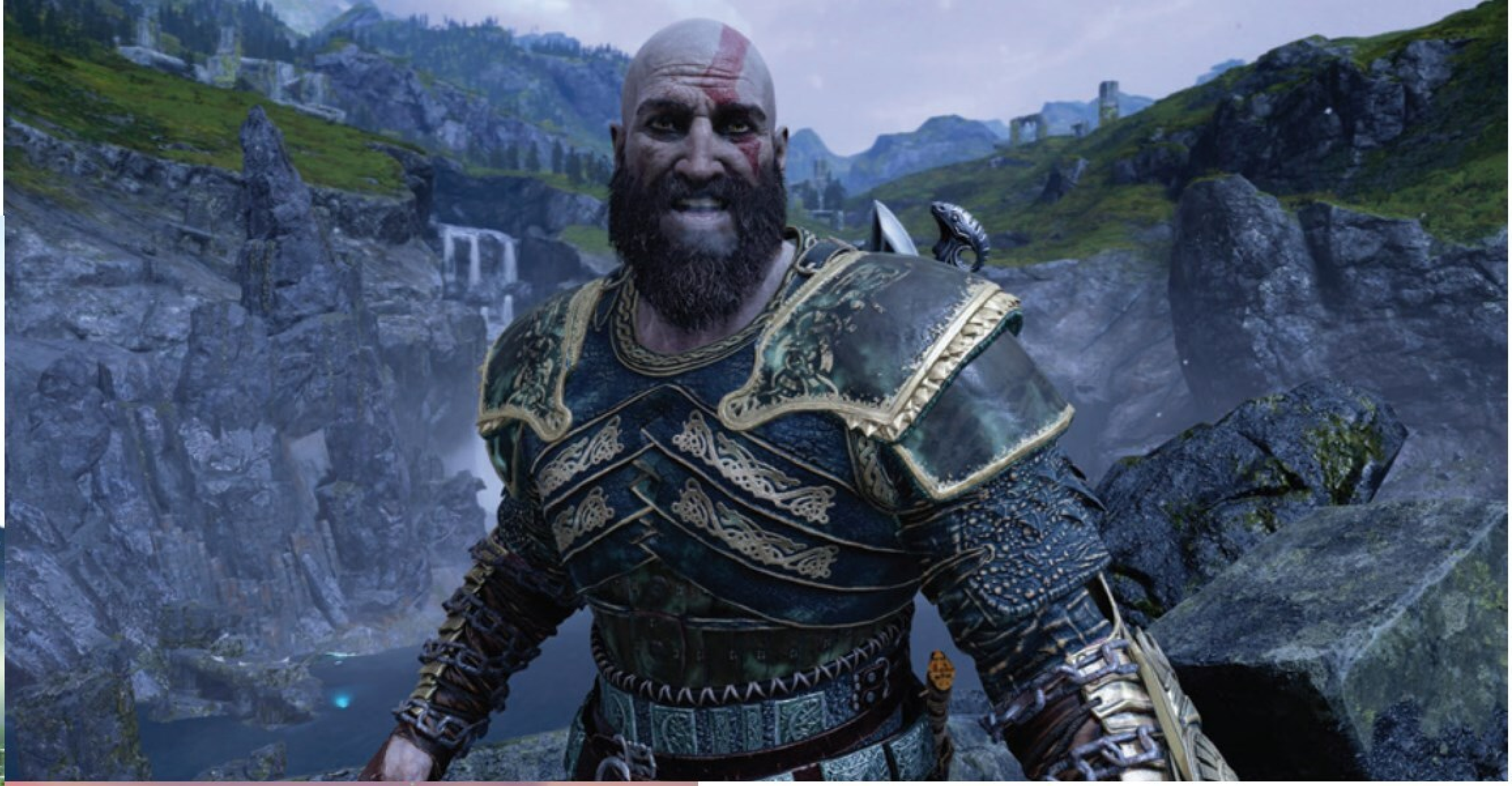


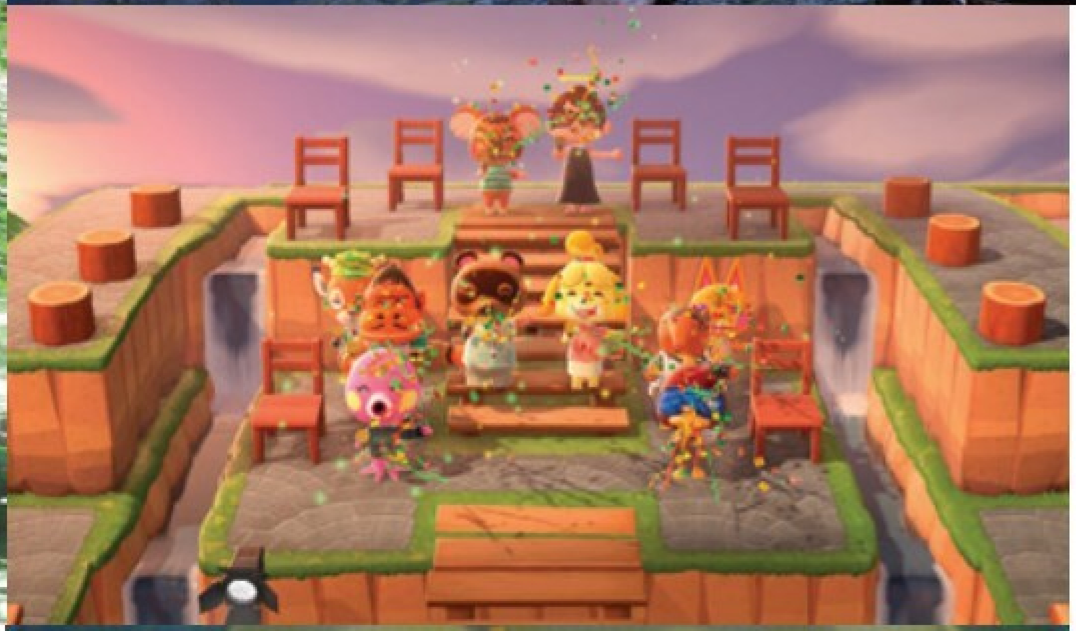
All article images taken in photo mode

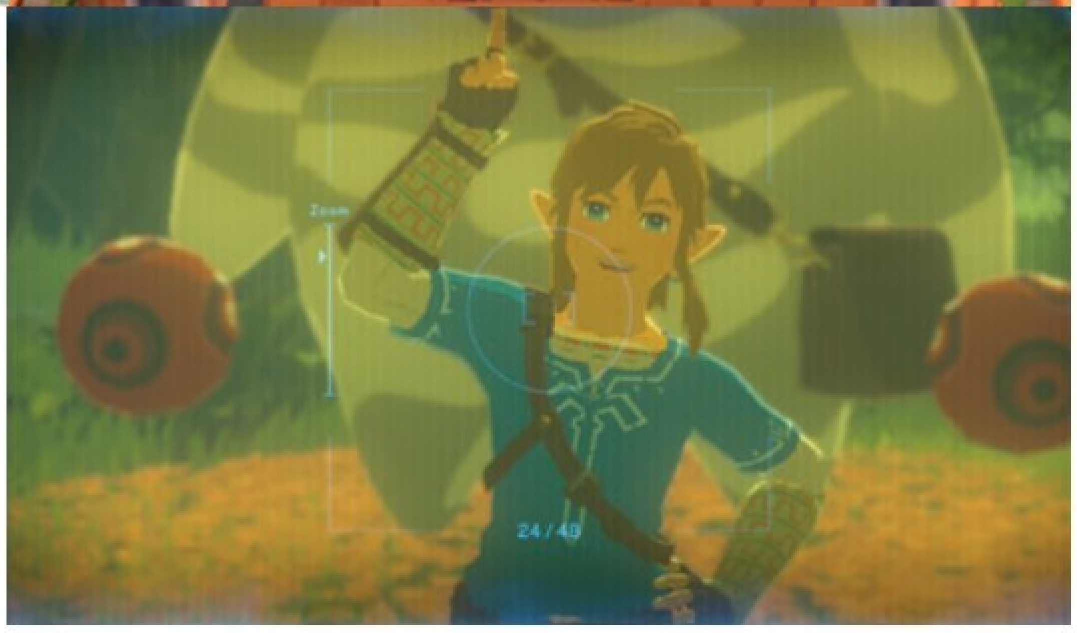
Children of the '90s may remember the surge of enthusiasm surrounding Pokémon Snap's N64 release. Unlike other popular Pokémon titles up to that point, it offered the chance to catch creatures not with a Poké Ball but with a camera. The game featured rushing rivers, sunny beaches, and dark caverns, all stuffed with familiar specimens. The most skilled players snapped – to our young minds – unbelievably realistic shots of these roving Pokémon in their natural habitats while the ever-moving vehicle pushed onward. But it wasn't enough to capture wild pictures of our favorite creatures. We needed to share these works of art with the world.

Short of parading friends past the home console to admire our digital albums, there didn't seem to be a good way to do so. Enter the Pokémon Snap Station. It tells you something about the game's popularity that its developer went to the trouble of getting these bulky printing machines set up across North America. Fans of the game could now find the nearest Pokémon Snap Station and print out physical copies of their photos to show off in real life. Though those magnificent machines – and most of the rental stores housing them – are long gone, the impulse to share awesome in-game photos is not. Gran Turismo 4 introduced its limited photo mode in 2005 and, though it didn't have all the bells and whistles we're used to today, it helped pave the path for other games to follow. When New Pokémon Snap launched over 20 years later, video game photography was everywhere.









Technology played a significant role in that transformation. Wireless internet connections and the soaring popularity of social media meant developers no longer needed to find a way to bring physical printing methods to the gaming masses. And, of course, graphics had come a long way since the N64-era. Better looking games meant more picture-worthy subjects. Mix all this in with the already-present urge to share epic moments with fellow gamers, and you've got a recipe for today's photo mode-filled landscape.

Now, it's almost more surprising when a game doesn't include a picture-taking feature. For some games, developers insert this mode directly into the game's world. Red Dead Redemption 2, for example, gives players a camera right out of 1899. The object sits in your inventory alongside your indispensable arsenal of weapons but lets you shoot the scenery rather than a meddlesome lawman. There's no shortage of breathtaking vistas to commit to film either. One of the most praised aspects of Red Dead Redemption 2 is its expansive and detailed environment which contains hazardous mountain passes, sweltering, alligator-haunted swamps, and windswept plains. You can even turn the camera on protagonist Author Morgan if you are so inclined.

Similarly, The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild leaned into diegetic photography when it was released in 2018. As Link explores the stunning open-world, he can pull out his trusty, phone-like Sheikah Slate to pose for a quick selfie or memorialize his journey. There's even an optional series of side quests challenging players to capture and relive special moments in the hopes of jogging Link's lost memory.

Animal Crossing: New Horizons also jumped on the in-game smartphone idea by giving the player a Nook Phone. Happily, it comes bundled with the island getaway package and doesn't put you in any more debt to local money-bags Tom Nook. Nintendo's 2020 hit slightly blends the in-game and non-diegetic picture modes. While players can – and did, judging from the copious amounts of pictures invading social media feeds during the pandemic – take fun selfies with the Nook device, the game also prompts players to take photos with the Switch's capture button during more significant celebratory moments.

Besides giving fans a way to share their in-game adventures – or misadventures in some cases – photo modes also allow them to experience their virtual sandboxes in slightly different ways than other players. One virtual photographer might set up shots that establish different relationships between characters or highlight their hero's unique view of the world. Occasionally, these pictures spark internet-wide fan theories or launch viral memes that, in turn, influence the game's legacy.

Many recent games packing a photo mode take the non-diegetic approach, perhaps finding gamers don't necessarily need the snapshots to have an in-game explanation. God of War and Ghost of Tsushima are great examples. After God of War launched, Santa Monic Studio's reboot of the well-known series introduced a photo mode feature. It offered several options for the discerning artist, including filters, borders, and an assortment of technical adjustments. While some used these tools to enhance the dramatic tone of Kratos' journey with his son, others delighted in slapping a smile on the Greek hero's usually stoic face. With perhaps one of the most lauded photo modes ever, Ghost of Tsushima invited players to craft the perfect shot with a dizzying amount of tools and the benefit of the game's cinematic style and particle effects.

It would have been hard for anyone with an online presence to avoid seeing images taken from these games, which speaks to another aspect of the modern photo mode. Players showcasing their in-game pictures with these tools simultaneously share the game with everyone in their social media circles. That's a big win for game makers wanting to get their creations in front of as many potential players as possible. Of course, this is not intentional for most would-be virtual photographers. Like the kids huddled around Pokémon Snap Stations in the late '90s, most gamers today just want to share cool pictures of their games with their friends. ◆

MOST DRAMATIC STUDIO PIVOTS

by Jill Grodt

Hello Games

Joe Danger to No Man's Sky

Pursuing fame and glory, the colorful daredevil Joe Danger races through courses filled with traps, dangerous animals, and wacky obstacles. Moving from the silly, side-scrolling Joe Danger games to the procedurally generated space expedition No Man's Sky was a genuinely unexpected pivot. For that, Hello Games gets the top spot.

Playground Games

Forza Horizon to Fable

Since its foundation, Playground Games has worked exclusively on the Forza Horizon series. But the team recently took an unexpected detour from its trademark franchise, changing gears and starting development on the next Fable. I guess every driver needs to stretch their legs.

Guerilla Games

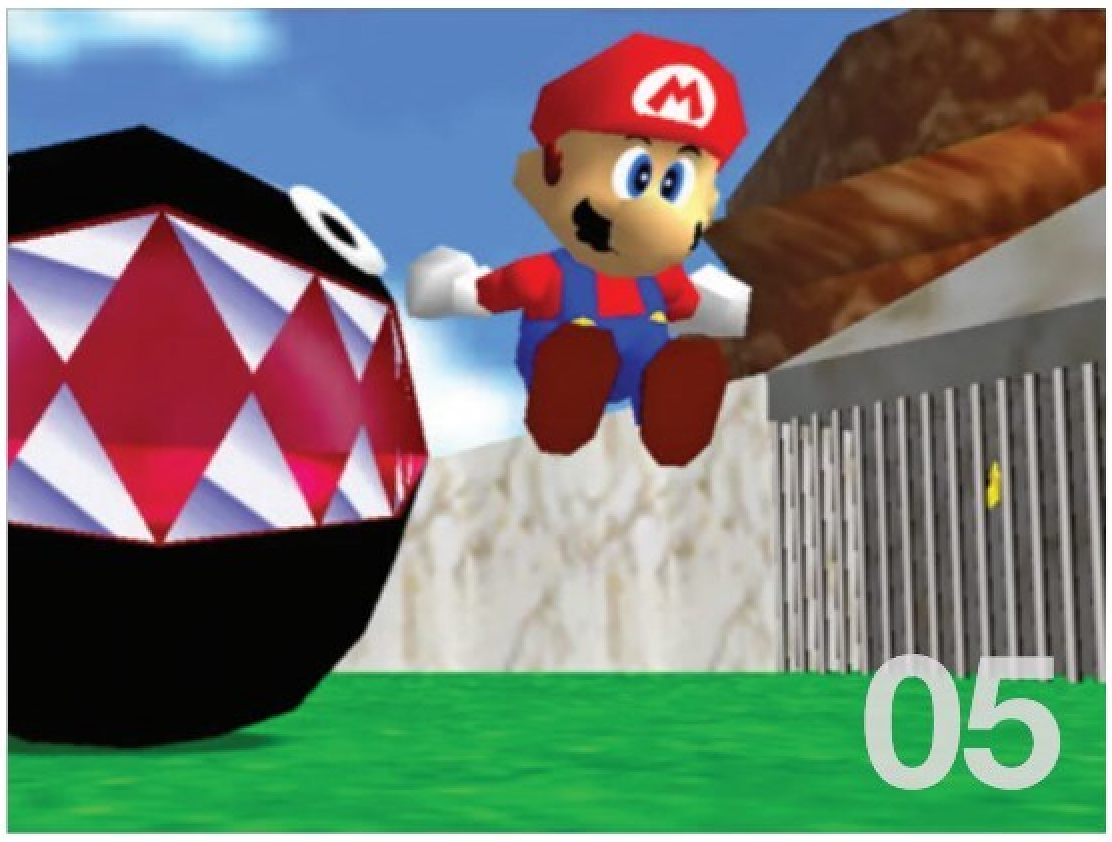
Killzone to Horizon Zero Dawn

In 2357, war rages between Earth's descendants in the Alpha Centauri system, and you are in the middle. So starts Guerilla Games' Killzone. After nearly a decade, the studio pivoted away from linear, interstellar battle and inexplicably set out to build a vast prehistoric land of robot dinosaurs. Horizon Zero Dawn's success suggests the studio made a good call.

Housemarque

Resogun to Returnal

Arcade-style shoot ‘em ups like Resogun were Housemarque’s bread and butter. But after a very public discussion about the genre’s lack of profitability, the developer began looking in a new direction. Luckily for us, that decision led the team to develop one of the best rogue-likes of 2021, the PS5-exclusive Returnal.



Nintendo

2D Mario Series to Super Mario 64

Everyone’s favorite plumber was a staple of 2D gaming, but after years of side-scrolling, goomba-stomping action, a new 3D realm appeared on the horizon. Nintendo decided to make the jump into another dimension with its star, Mario.

From Software

Armored Core to Demon’s Souls

Thinking of From Software today, you might envision the dark, Medieval-inspired Souls series. However, the company’s early history centered on the distant future. The switch from the long-running third-person mech shooter series Armored Core to Demon’s Souls certainly turned some heads.

Valve Software

Half-Life 2 to Half-Life: Alyx

Half-Life and its sequel earned the series a reputation for pushing the shooter genre’s boundaries. Though the games are beloved, a follow-up seemed increasingly unlikely as the years passed and Valve transitioned away from developing games. It was a genuine surprise when the company announced the long-awaited follow-up title would be a VR exclusive.

Neversoft Entertainment

Tony Hawk Pro Skater to Gun

What do cowboys and skateboarders have in common? Not a whole lot. That’s why Neversoft’s project Gun makes it onto this list. Released between the studio’s seventh and eighth Tony Hawk games, Gun let players ride through the Wild West instead of wild skate parks.

Sega AM2

Arcade Games to Shenmue

Before launching Shenmue in 1999, Sega AM2 had a long and celebrated run making titles fit for the local arcade. Virtua Fighter is still receiving new installments 25 years later. Shenmue’s explorable setting and multi-part story were worlds apart from the studio’s previous work.

Naughty Dog

Crash Bandicoot to The Last of Us

Let’s be honest. If Naughty Dog’s characters came to life, its earliest and most recent creations would not run in the same circles. The studios’ shift from platformers starring cartoonish mascots to darker, narrative-driven epics was slow compared to other pivots on this list. However, the stark contrast earns it a spot. ◆

Genshin Impact's Exciting Future

by Daniel Tack

A bold content cadence keeps the journey going strong

When Genshin Impact launched, the bold style and vast world of discovery resonated with many players. Since its release, significant content updates have made the game bigger and better. As the third region, Inazuma, begins to roll out, there's a lot yet to come. Whether you face the new content alone or in co-op experiences, that's another choice to be made. With Horizon Zero Dawn's Aloy coming to the game for all players, that's another colossal door swung wide open if developer MiHoYo decides to collaborate with other brands and IPs in the future.

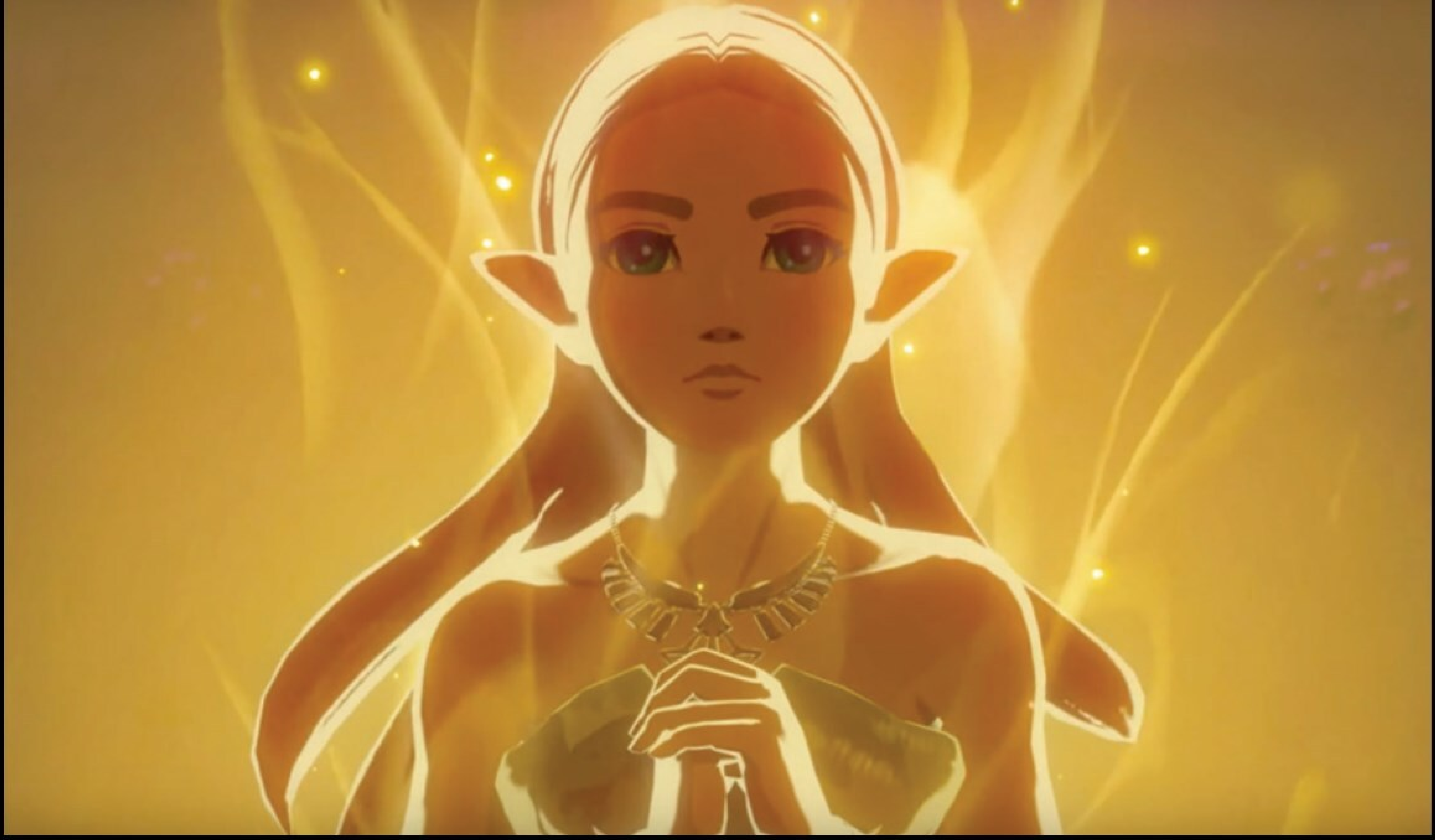
Inazuma has arrived. However, it's not all there yet. Other important locales are being added until the area is complete. Some extras may come later, much like Dragonspine became an experience for the Mondstadt region. New islands like Watatsumi Island and Seirai Island are coming, and more content after that. The island structure of Inazuma lets MiHoYo experiment with different takes on the unified design philosophy of the region, centered on electricity, cherry blossoms, and Japanese motifs. One of Genshin Impact's great strengths is that MiHoYo consistently pushes out new features to explore. While that includes the various gacha characters to collect, level up, and customize to your heart's content, there are also constant updates to the world itself and what you can do in it.

While the classic core is the exploration progression, interacting with the world with elemental properties and combinations and taking on monsters from the smallest slime to towering golems, the side content adds some refreshing flavor. These offerings began to ramp up when mini-games and, more importantly, player housing came out. Inside your own little Serenitea Pot, you can have your own customizable cozy home realm. Inviting your friends over to check out your cool finds is always a highlight.

Fishing is the next big side-content upgrade. Different types of bait and a multitude of locations can yield diverse types of fish for cooking and other special rewards. Rare and prized fish are part of the equation, with new rods and other tools as part of the available turn-ins. And of course, there's a serene pool you can install in the home realm where you can place caught, precious ornamental fish. You can watch them swim around in your own meditative, tranquil homestead – the perfect timeout from the grind.

Inazuma isn't going to be the last region added to Teyvat. In fact, there are multiple regions on the way that'll come over the following years, each with its characters and signature style. Sumeru, Fontaine, Natlan, and Snezhnaya all represent massive regional content additions, planned for rollout as the years go on. Genshin, while not an MMORPG, bears all the content trappings traditionally associated with one. Along the way, expect plenty of new side activities to engage in as well. Genshin Impact's success is made more impressive by the fact that you can play it on your phone as well as your primary platform, should you want to get in and do some daily events when you're on the road.

While Genshin's monetization system undoubtedly drags down the overall experience, its beautiful world, full of fun things to do, can be hard to ignore. We'll continue to see how Genshin's incredibly massive shape continues to take form as time goes by. ◆



Princess Zelda Deserves Her Own Game

Step aside, Link!

by Jason Guisao, associate editor

This conversation happened to many of us growing up: a parental figure who knows nothing about video games saw us controlling that little, green elf-man on the television and asked what we were playing. You probably tried to explain this is not simply Mario or "Poké-man." This is The Legend of Zelda, an epic narrative with endearing personalities and spellbinding music. And, yes, they're right to immediately assume that you were playing as the titular character because why wouldn't you be?

Since the first mainline game debuted in 1986, Link has consistently emerged as the playable protagonist of The Legend of Zelda series. But what about the heroine that the entire franchise is named after? Zelda's time to shine is long overdue, and as the literal reincarnation of an omniscient goddess, gaming's favorite princess has always been more than a damsel in distress.

Take, for instance, Zelda's incredibly significant, yet sidelined, role in Breath of the Wild. Not only did she traverse the entirety of Hyrule with Link and the four Champions to prepare for the eventual resurgence of Ganon, Zelda even locked herself in a death pit with the embodiment of evil for over 100 years! I mean, has she really ever needed saving? Why not make the Breath of the Wild sequel a prequel (Age of Calamity doesn't count, in my opinion) chronicling Zelda's offscreen, coming-of-age journey in a sandbox teeming with side quests and exciting mysteries?

There are other opportunities to slide a Zelda-led experience into the franchise. In A Link to the Past, Zelda and the six other legendary maidens are sent to the Dark World – it'd be interesting to explore the sprawling, corrupted biomes of the Sacred Realm and slay waves of patrolling monsters alongside a crew of Seven Sages descendants. Or how about the tumultuous odyssey of Sheik in Ocarina of Time? The wacky adventures of amnesiac-princess-turned-pirate-captain, Tetra, in The Wind Waker? Almost every iteration of Zelda has the potential to, at the very least, stand toe-to-toe with Link, but for some reason, Nintendo sticks with tired scenarios where she is captured or immobilized.

Moreover, Zelda's powers would be fun to use – a conjurable bow for midair headshots on ferocious lynels, telepathy to assist allies, teleportation for outpost infiltration or close calls, precognition (I'm thinking of a "tactical camera" mechanic that slows time before an engagement), and the ability to create or deactivate barriers could make combat far more nuanced and engaging. Zelda should be leading the charge towards a new era where long-awaited features like fully integrated co-op – e.g., the two protagonists embarking on a harrowing, 100-hour quest together – could exist.

An original story for Zelda could work just as well. In my ideal game, Link is dead, and the princess must set out on her own to defeat a new enemy. Let's be honest, she's more than capable of rising to the challenge. She could easily piece together the Triforce to usher in a golden age. Better yet, during the final arc, Zelda could don the classic green garb of her fallen knight in some hyper-meta, goosebumps-inducing tribute – the orchestral score swelling and the boss swooping down from a stormy sky to meet its maker. I hope you're taking notes, Nintendo!

***The views and opinions expressed in this column are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of* Game Informer**

CELEBRATE YOUR LOVE OF COMICS

by Matt Miller

MARVEL
1
DUGGAN
X-MEN
1

1

Samsung S7+ Tablet

For many, the comic reading hobby has moved to a digital experience, with apps like Comixology and Marvel Unlimited allowing for full enjoyment of great graphic novels, minus a paper component. We've tried any number of phones and tablets in pursuit of the ideal reader. The Samsung S7+ is the best option we've encountered and happens to be an excellent tablet for other purposes as well.

For reading comics, your primary goal is likely screen size and visual fidelity, and the S7+ has you covered in both departments. The massive 12.4-inch display is slightly larger than a standard modern comic. In use, with very narrow black bar framing on top and bottom, each page is just as big as it would be in a print copy. Colors positively pop off the Super AMOLED screen, with incredible resolution and rich clarity. The optional adaptive lighting makes it easy to move from one reading location to another and maintains natural quality. Low blue light emission helps reduce eye strain. The 1.3-pound weight is a bit heavy for long reading sessions but a small price for an ideal viewing experience.

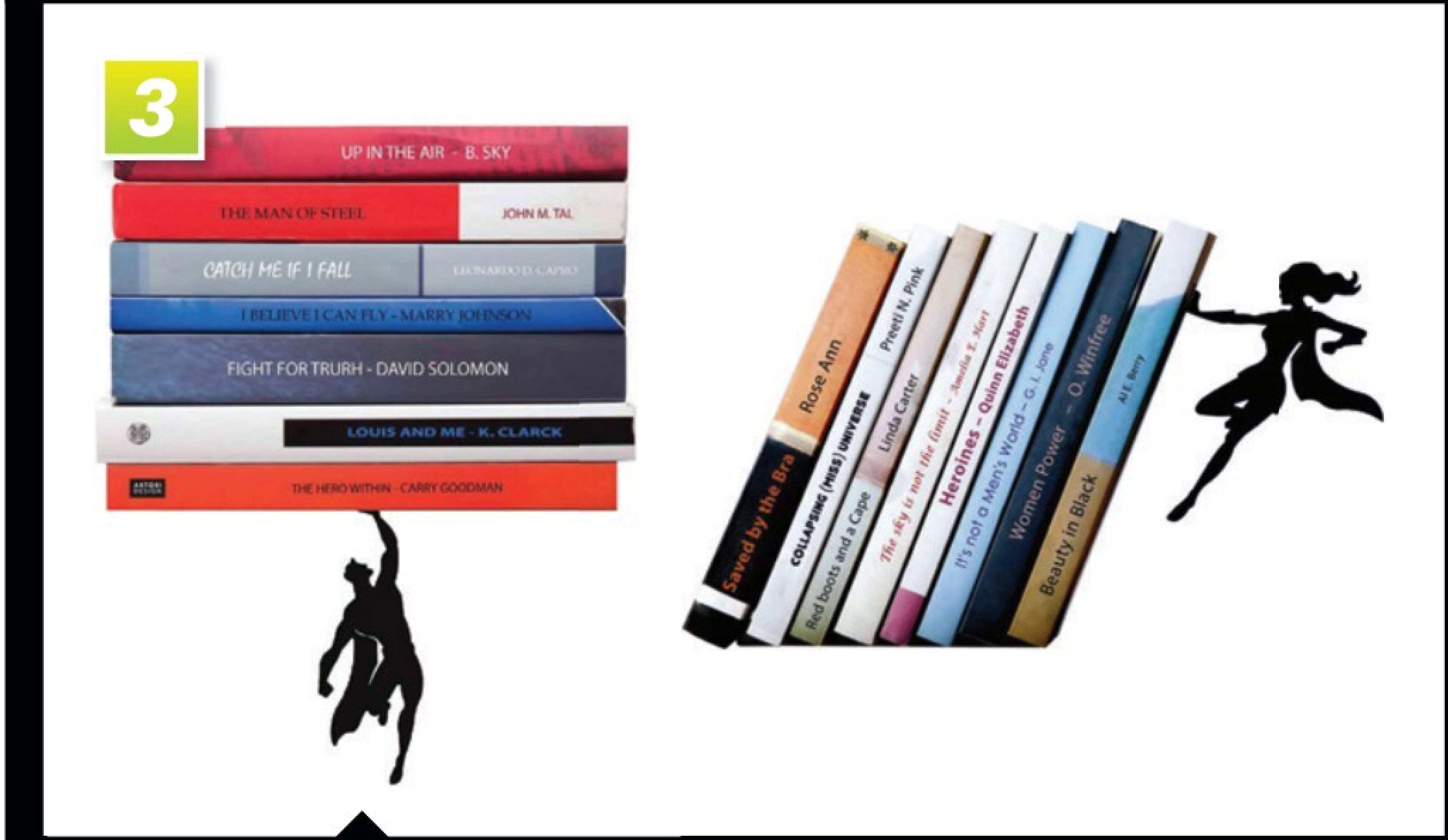
Of course, at this price point, the S7+ better do more than reading comics. Games play, look, and sound stellar on the tablet, whether you're downloading something new from the Google Play Store, or connecting up to Xbox Game Pass Ultimate. The included S Pen allows for various writing tasks with precision or doing your own drawing if all that comic reading inspires you. A book cover keyboard (sold separately) also allows you to transition the tablet to use as a PC-like laptop; we found it easy to write a few emails or documents and pull the keyboard back off for in-hand tablet use. Fast processor, 120Hz refresh rate, and excellent battery life tip the scales and make the S7+ a standout success.

$849 | *samsung.com*

2 Diamond Select Animated Style Statues

Inspired by the whimsical art of Skottie Young, the growing collection of Marvel animated-style statues is the perfect balance of awesome and amusing. These lovely collector's pieces stand roughly five to six inches in height (depending on the character), making them small enough not to crowd your shelf. But with incredible detail in both paint application and sculpting, they'll look beautiful no matter where you decide to settle them down.

$39-$59 | *diamondselecttoys.com*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UP IN THE AIR - B. SKY
THE MAN OF STEEL
JOHN M. TAL
CATCH ME IF I FALL
LEONARDO D. CAPRIO
I BELIEVE I CAN FLY - MARRY JOHNSON
FIGHT FOR TRURH - DAVID SOLOMON
LOUIS AND ME - K. CLARCK
THE HERO WITHIN - CARRY GOODMAN
Saved by the Bra
Rose Ann
COLLAPSING (MISS) UNIVERSE
Red boots and a Cape
Preeti N. Pink
Linda Carter
The sky is not the limit
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Quinn Elizabeth
It's not a Men's World
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3 Superhero Bookends & Floating Bookshelves

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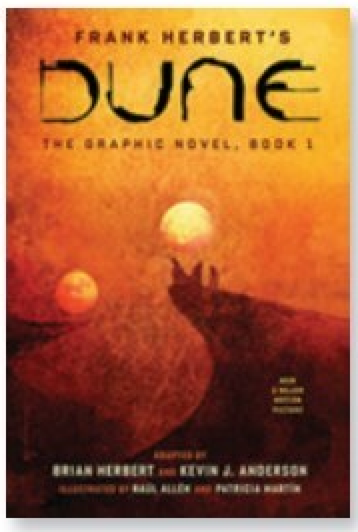
$30 | *artoridesign.com*

4 Superman Kryptonite Crystal

You never know when the Man of Steel might wig out and need corralling, so it's wise to do as Batman does and keep some Kryptonite on hand. Crafted from genuine clear crystal, with an added green effect, this small (about two and a half inches in height) but beautiful display piece sparkles from its 19 facets and sits atop a black pedestal with the familiar S-shield insignia. ◆

$90 | *swarovski.com*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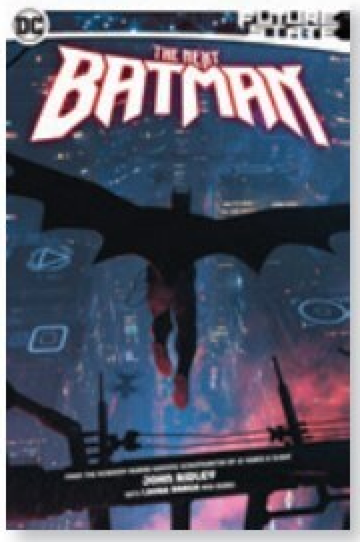
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THE NEXT
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STEAM DECK

What is it, and will it change PC gaming?

by Jill Grodt

In mid-July, Valve, the company behind PC gaming's prominent digital storefront, Steam, officially introduced the world to the Steam Deck. The nearly foot-long handheld allows its owners to take their Steam library with them wherever they go. Rumors that the company was working on a handheld device began swirling earlier in the year, but the reveal nonetheless captured the industry's attention. The announcement highlighted the Steam Deck's power and portability. The accompanying reveal video showed the device running triple-A games like Control and Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order with seeming ease.

How does the Steam Deck manage this? Below the device's 7-inch LCD screen capable of 1280x800 resolution and a 60hz refresh rate lies a novel AMD APU. It boasts a 4-core Zen 2 CPU with two threads per core and a GPU packing 8 RDNA 2 compute units. Currently, there are three different Steam Deck versions to choose from, each being broadly similar except for internal storage. The cheapest option, priced at $399, has 64 GB, while the $529 and

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$649 alternatives have 256 GB and 512 GB, respectively. The Steam Deck runs on the Linux-based SteamOS, has dual touchpads alongside standard controller inputs, and has a battery life of anywhere from two to eight hours.

The excitement surrounding this new portable device is evident from the response to the initial announcement and the subsequent mad dash to get a pre-order. Like last year's scramble to secure PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S orders, the process resulted in crashing websites and disappointed customers. The first wave of Steam Deck reservations, which guaranteed a system at launch, rapidly sold out. Steam Decks reserved as of this writing should arrive after the second quarter of 2022. If the Steam Deck pre-orders continue down a similar path as its console counterparts, anyone without a pre-order may have difficulty getting one soon. However much the Steam Deck reservation process recalls Sony and Microsoft's, it is hard to talk about Valve's portable PC without touching on the industry's other major handheld system, the Nintendo Switch.

While the Steam Deck is not targeting the same audience as the Switch, the comparison between the two handheld systems seems unavoidable for two significant reasons. One, Nintendo unveiled its upcoming OLED model the week before Valve's announcement. The newest Switch features a larger, 7-inch OLED screen, a more versatile stand, Ethernet (LAN) port, and twice the storage of its predecessor. All things that undoubtedly improve on the current model of the Switch. However, after long-time reports of a Switch Pro with 4K capabilities, the reality of Nintendo's offering prompted a flurry of discourse that was still ongoing when the Steam Deck reveal dropped.

The second and most apparent reason linking the two devices in peoples' minds is simply that both systems let you play games on the go. They are also set to release at the end of this year. The OLED Switch is out in October, while the first Steam Decks should ship in December. The release windows for the gaming handhelds could mean both will compete for attention and sales during the 2021 holiday season. The Switch has been breaking company sales records since it launched in 2017, but will the Steam Deck accomplish a similar feat? It's difficult to say for sure.

Valve's handheld machine could attract an untapped audience that, though unlikely to buy a gaming computer, could be interested in Steam titles with the right hardware. The higher-priced Steam Deck options may deter some, but the base $399 model might seem worthwhile to someone weighing the price against Steam's sheer number of games. Additionally, the Steam Deck's form factor may seem more familiar and user-friendly to those unused to computer gaming.

It is also interesting to speculate on how a popular portable PC could change the game industry. Recently, publishers like Sony have been putting previously exclusive titles – Horizon Zero Dawn and Death Stranding, for example – on PC. According to the head of PlayStation Studios, Hermen Hulst, the company is encouraged by the early ports' success and may look to make more games available on PC in the future. If the Steam Deck becomes a must-have system, and the PC gaming audience grew significantly, could it cause more games to jump the barrier between console and PC? Even if the cards don't fall that way, more people with access to more games could cause unexpected change.

The Steam Deck revolution is far from certain, and Valve's track record with hardware has been rocky. The company's Steam Machine launched in 2015 after years of development, providing its audience with a customizable PC running on SteamOS that plugged into a TV. In short, the freedom of a computer with the ease of a console. Curiously, the Steam Machine and the Steam Deck provoke similar questions. Do dedicated PC players, many that have poured time and resources into their gaming setups, want a more console-like gaming experience? Will this system draw in more interest for PC-exclusive offerings? Who is the target consumer for this product? Unfortunately, the Steam Machine did not become a household item, and by 2018 Valve had removed its purchase page from the store.

However, the Steam Deck is not the Steam Machine, and maybe its portability will make Valve's newest hardware a hit. A handheld PC is an intriguing concept, and Valve's take has enough going for it at launch that it is worth watching. Whether it rockets to success or not, one thing the Steam Deck, and the enthusiasm around it, highlights is that players and companies alike are excited about portable gaming. ◆

UNDEAD OUTBREAK

World of Warcraft and the award-winning Pandemic board game collide in this cooperative adventure

by Matt Miller

World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King – A Pandemic System Board Game is a mouthful of a name. It's also the meeting point between two long-running and beloved franchises. The Warcraft MMO has maintained a place of primacy in video gamers' minds for a nearly unprecedented period since launching in 2004. Likewise, Pandemic and its many offshoots and expansions have garnered tabletop hobbyists' enthusiasm since its original release in 2008. Until now, that board game series had yet to venture into licensed territory. The unique appeal of Wrath of the Lich King, and the seamless way the MMO expansion slips into the Pandemic formula, made it an irresistible combo for the designers at Z-Man Games. After extensively playing the final version and chatting with the minds behind its creation, the ease with which the two fit together is striking. It seems almost surprising that it took so long for these mammoth properties to come together.

After Z-Man Games and Blizzard decided to work together, one of the first tasks was zeroing in on the right corner of the fictional universe. After all, there are years of adventures and characters to draw on within the Warcraft fiction. With Pandemic's focus on holding back ballooning threats from spreading into the rest of the world, Wrath of the Lich King rapidly rose to the fore as the clear choice. "Obviously, we had discussions," says game designer Alexandar Ortloff. "We didn't come in thinking Lich King, but it was high on the list, so well regarded, and so iconic. And for the purposes of Pandemic, as a system, the Scourge mapped really well to that sort of propagating, single enemy."

That narrative beat also embodied another critical element essential to a Pandemic game; it's the moment when all of the heroes – Horde and Alliance – effectively work together against a common enemy. "Wrath of the Lich King is probably the point in the lore at which the Horde and Alliance are the most cooperative that they've ever gotten," says director of brand management Justin Kemppainen. "It's the culmination of a major storyline with Arthas. Plus, a lot of people just really, really love the expansion."

Like Wrath of the Lich King, players of the board game venture onto a vast map, this time of the continent of Northrend. Players must hold back the tide of his undead Scourge and ultimately defeat the Lich King. Pandemic players should quickly recognize the core mechanic at play; several cards are drawn on each player's turn, depicting locations where new ghouls spawn, rather than the disease cubes of the original board game. Meanwhile, instead of curing four diseases, the roughly analogous goal is for players to complete three quests, then confront Arthas at Icecrown Citadel. Those same experienced Pandemic players know about the ensuing fun, as everyone works to balance progression toward the victory goals with the need to keep the spreading threat under control. Let those ghouls run rampant (eventually joined by hulking Abominations), and the undead overrun Northrend.

However, the Wrath of the Lich King board game is far more than a reskin of familiar mechanics. Several features set the game apart. "This is the first Pandemic game in which the cards in your hand don't tend to just correlate to locations," Ortloff says. Instead, the cards represent distinct actions like Fight, Defend, Travel, and Heal – each of which can enhance your own or another player's actions. Conceptually, it lends the game a more active and engaged playstyle. You continuously play your cards, contributing to the sense of an epic showdown. "That was something we talked about pretty early on," Ortloff continues. "We had this sort of notion of heroic Pandemic; we wanted a Pandemic that could match the more bombastic, high-energy themes of World of Warcraft."

With constant combat situations at hand, another significant change is adding dice, which serve two primary purposes. First, players roll dice to confront the legions of undead propagating across the continent. Success and block results determine the number of enemies destroyed and how much damage you take in the process.

The other dice-driven dynamic is my favorite part of the game: questing. The game includes several cards representing familiar raids and dungeons – places like Naxxramas, The Nexus, or Ulduar. In each session, the group must conquer three of the nine included quests before surmounting Icecrown. To do so, players can progress through a quest card by nailing successful dice rolls and adding cards that match the following required action for the quest. You gradually advance along a linear track by contributing Fight, Travel, or other specific actions until the quest completes. As more heroes join a quest space, it becomes easier to power through the necessary steps since there's a higher chance that at least one of you has the hero needed to progress.

Along the way, each player controls one of the iconic characters from the Warcraft mythology. Jaina Proudmoore, Lady Liadrin, Muradin Bronzebeard, Sylvanas Windrunner, Tirion Fordring, Thrall, and Varian Wrynn are playable, each with an impressive power to help turn the tide. In my first playthrough, I controlled Thrall and excitedly deployed his chain lightning to wipe out ghouls across a whole swath of the map.

Naxxramas
The Nexus
The Scourge Rises
Gundrak
Azjol-Nerub
Thrall
Sylvanas Windrunner
Stronghold
Borrowed Time
Defend

Whether it's those familiar characters, the forces of the undead Scourge, or the Lich King himself, detailed miniatures represent all the characters – another departure from the core Pandemic experience. Wrath of the Lich King features 47 plastic pieces in total, leading to an impressive table presentation. Adding to that tableau is Icecrown Citadel, a cardboard piece that towers over the northwestern section of the board and flips over in the endgame to represent the castle's peak; the Lich King then moves there for the rest of the game. "We needed something to prevent you from utilizing that space," Kemppainen says. "And then our team had this idea of putting this elaborate piece in, so now we've got this really cool three-dimensional punch board piece."

After playing a complete game with the designers, I made several more attempts at defeating the Lich King from home. Like with the non-licensed Pandemic games I've enjoyed, I was continually impressed with the ratcheting tension of the system, which uses card shuffling to repeat trouble spots across the board. I love the looming presence of the Lich King; ahead of the final quest, he moves about the board, increasing the danger of his current region. Rooted in the core mechanics of a stellar board game and with the production values and fantasy flair of the Warcraft universe, it's a game that feels primed for success. If only I could say the same about my attempts to bring down Arthas when I played on Mythic difficulty settings.

World of Warcraft
Wrath of the Lich King
Z-MAN

World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King – A Pandemic System Board Game is planned for release this holiday season

The team behind XCOM brings its tactical expertise to Marvel's Midnight Suns

» **PLATFORM**
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» **STYLE**
1-Player Strategy/Role-Playing

» **PUBLISHER**
2K Games

» **DEVELOPER**
Firaxis Games

» **RELEASE**
March 2022

THE DARKER SIDE OF MARVEL

BY BEN REEVES

THREE HUNDRED YEARS AGO, THE WORLD NEARLY ENDED.

During the Salem Witch Trials of 1692, a powerful sorceress named Lilith, the Mother of Demons, launched an assault on our planet. With an army of flesh-starved hellions at her disposal, Lilith nearly ripped a hole in reality and unshackled an ancient Cthulhu-like elder god. The world hung on the edge of a dark precipice. Until a mysterious group of heroes called the Midnight Suns emerged and put Lilith's reign of terror to an end. The world was safe.

For a time.

Now, our planet is under siege again. The paramilitary terrorist organization known as Hydra has uncovered Lilith's tomb and resurrected the Mother of Demons. Lilith is back on the rampage and threatening to finish the job she started centuries ago. Her return is the culmination of a war of prophecy, set in motion ages ago, and this time it's going to take the full might of Marvel's greatest – and grimmest – heroes to put Lilith back underground.

All Marvel's characters, images and designs are © 2021 MARVEL

Books like the iconic *How to Draw Comics the Marvel Way* helped inspire Midnight Suns' character designs and the overall look of the game

LIFE AFTER XCOM

Firaxis Games is a premier developer of strategy games. Founded in 1996 by legendary designer Sid Meier, the studio is known for its genre-defining work on the Civilization and XCOM series. But after the release of XCOM 2: War of The Chosen in 2017, Firaxis' XCOM team stood at a crossroads. Should it make another XCOM? Or was it time for something new?

"I remember being very personally fulfilled at the end of War of the Chosen," says creative director Jake Solomon. "We'd just made something really big – we'd made the second XCOM, and then we made this enormous expansion pack. And the idea with that was to fill every hole and make my ideal design for what I thought XCOM was. [After that] we were really fulfilled."

Firaxis didn't have to stand at a crossroads for long. An opportunity soon came knocking on its door. An executive vice president at Marvel (who wishes to go unnamed) is a massive fan of Firaxis' games – and XCOM in particular. As development on War of the Chosen wrapped, this EVP called Solomon to chat. Solomon remembers the call, and he was particularly impressed with the executive's intimate knowledge and love for the XCOM series. More importantly, he offered Firaxis a chance to create a strategy game using the Marvel license. The team leaped at the opportunity.

"It was a real lightning bolt out of nowhere," says Solomon. "It was like, 'Hey, would you be interested in this?' And I was like, 'Uh sure!'

Several members of the Firaxis team have a love for Marvel's heroes that stretches back decades. Solomon even describes himself as a "diehard," so the team had no shortage of ideas for characters with which it wanted to work. The real challenge was finding a corner of the Marvel universe not yet oversaturated.

"Marvel is everywhere," says Solomon. "They are the biggest IP. The movies they make have been the biggest movies in the world for over a decade. They just started making shows, and guess what? They're the most popular shows in the world. There are decades of comics, big games, cartoons, toys, and theme park attractions. I have Miles Morales on cans of soup in my house and Iron Man on tubes of toothpaste for my kids. The challenge, as a creative, is how do we find a corner of the Marvel Universe to call our own? How do we tell our own story that people haven't seen before?"

As Firaxis' developers continued thinking about the comics they loved as kids, the team gravitated towards the darker, mystical side of the Marvel Universe – specifically, a beloved '90s run of Ghost Rider comics called *Ghost Rider & Blaze: Spirits of Vengeance*. This title kicked off with a supernatural epic called "Rise of the Midnight Sons," in which Ghost Rider teamed up with other supernatural heroes like Doctor Strange and Blade to prevent Lilith, the Mother of Demons, from opening a dimensional rift and conquering the world.

"When we started talking about Midnight Sons, everything just clicked," says Solomon. "One of my favorite parts of the project were these really late nights where we talked about Midnight Sons. It was like we pulled a chest of toys out of the attic … The cool thing about 'Rise of The Midnight Sons,' and why it's so important to me, is that it is so of its time. The stories are kind of timeless, but the look was very early '90s. I mean, you need to look at the comics; it could have been a Mötley Crüe album cover. When you read the *Midnight Sons* or *Spirit of Vengeance*, it's like the guitar riffs just leap off the page."

Midnight Sons may seem like a deep cut to some, but the team of characters enabled Firaxis to tell a compelling story with few constraints. Better still, the studio knew it could draw on Marvel's expansive roster of heroes. "We wanted a lot of our characters to be a little bit of a fish out of water so we could pull them over to this dark side, and it gets more fun from a narrative standpoint," says Solomon. "It's more fun to think of Captain America having to deal with Blade. Tony Stark is probably the best example of that. Tony Stark and Doctor Strange. That is kind of the dichotomy of the game. Those two are both brilliant, and both completely misunderstand the other, so let's force them to work together."

IS MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS PART OF A LARGER MARVEL GAMES' UNIVERSE?

"I'll say this, something that is very cool about this modern era of games is that we're given the freedom to allow all of our partners to tell their story," says Marvel Games' vice president and head of creative Bill Rosemann. "We don't want to put any restrictions on anyone, so we don't want to say, 'Well, you can't blow up the moon because, in this other game, they need the moon.' We want to give our collaborators the ultimate freedom. So, I would say that Midnight Suns is an all-new, original story. It's its own Marvel reality. It stands alone, but when you play, you'll see it's Marvel. 'Oh, there's Hydra. There's SHIELD. This is New York City, and here's the Sanctum Sanctorum. Oh, the *Daily Bugle*.' It's Marvel, but it's [Firaxis' version] of the Marvel Universe."

RESURRECTING THE ULTIMATE HUNTER

Marvel's Midnight Suns begins with an attack on Doctor Strange's home, the Sanctum Sanctorum. Hydra is on the hunt for magical artifacts, and Strange has one of the world's largest collections of occult paraphernalia. During this attack, Strange learns that Hydra plans to help Lilith resurrect the Elder God Chthon, an almighty being who wants to consume our planet. An ultra-rare celestial event known as the Midnight Sun is only a few months away, and this event gives Lilith a window of opportunity to put Earth on Chthon's menu. Strange knows that Lilith must be stopped. Unfortunately, that task won't be easy.

"Picture your favorite Omega-level supervillain in Marvel: Thanos, Apocalypse, Ultron, or Dr. Doom. Lilith is all of that and then some," says Solomon. "Not only does she have godlike powers that grow stronger every day. Not only does she have the Lilin, an unending army of demons at her disposal. But, with a single touch, Lilith can corrupt and command any villain or hero in the Marvel Universe. So it becomes a question of, 'How on Earth do you beat somebody like that?'"

Hoping to find that answer, Doctor Strange turns to the only group of heroes in the Marvel universe with any experience confronting Lilith: the Midnight Suns. In Firaxis' re-envisioning, the Midnight Suns are a team of supernatural monster hunters named after the celestial event they have sworn to prevent. The Midnight Suns are an eclectic crew. One of the most recognizable members is the vampire hunter Blade. But the group also includes Robbie Reyes, a young mechanic and the newest incarnation of Ghost Rider. From Marvel's New Mutants line, Magik is the team's mutant teleporter, capable sorceress, and expert swordsman, all wrapped into one impressive package. Rounding out the group is Nico Minoru, a member of The Runaways and an extremely powerful – if unreliable – spellcaster.

Using their combined knowledge, the Midnight Suns resurrect the Hunter. This warrior is an entirely new character for the Marvel universe, and Firaxis worked closely with Marvel to create a hero who could stand toe-to-toe with the rest of the publisher's

WHO ARE THE FALLEN?

Lilith controls a massive army of demons, and she adds to her numbers almost every day. One of Lilith's most insidious powers is the ability to corrupt and control anyone with a touch. This ability means that any Marvel hero or villain can fall under her spell. Firaxis calls these corrupted versions of popular characters The Fallen. Encounters with these characters throughout the campaign function like boss battles. Firaxis isn't ready to share specific names at this point. Still, The Fallen are recognizable and iconic faces from Marvel lore, and Firaxis was quick to reiterate that players will encounter fallen versions of both villains and heroes.

iconic personalities. However, players also have a hand in the Hunter's creation by customizing their gender, facial features, and other cosmetic options.

Firaxis worked up a detailed backstory for the Hunter. This battle-hardened warrior was the original leader of the Midnight Suns when they last fought Lilith hundreds of years ago, but the warrior died alongside her in battle. When the modern version of the Midnight Suns resurrected the Hunter, the team hoped this timeworn champion would give them some insight into Lilith's weaknesses. Unfortunately, the Hunter doesn't remember how they defeated Lilith the first time around, leaving the Midnight Suns back at square one.

Like Lilith, the Hunter is one of the last descendants of an ancient race called The Blood, powerful beings who can trace their lineage back to the Elder Gods. The Hunter's genealogy grants them special powers, mainly the ability to channel ancient arcane energies, which they use with abandon in Midnight Suns strategic battles. However, these energies are an explosive cocktail of both light and dark magic, which makes them particularly dangerous. The Hunter and Lilith's connection to The Blood isn't a simple coincidence; the two characters are intimately connected because the Hunter is Lilith's biological child.

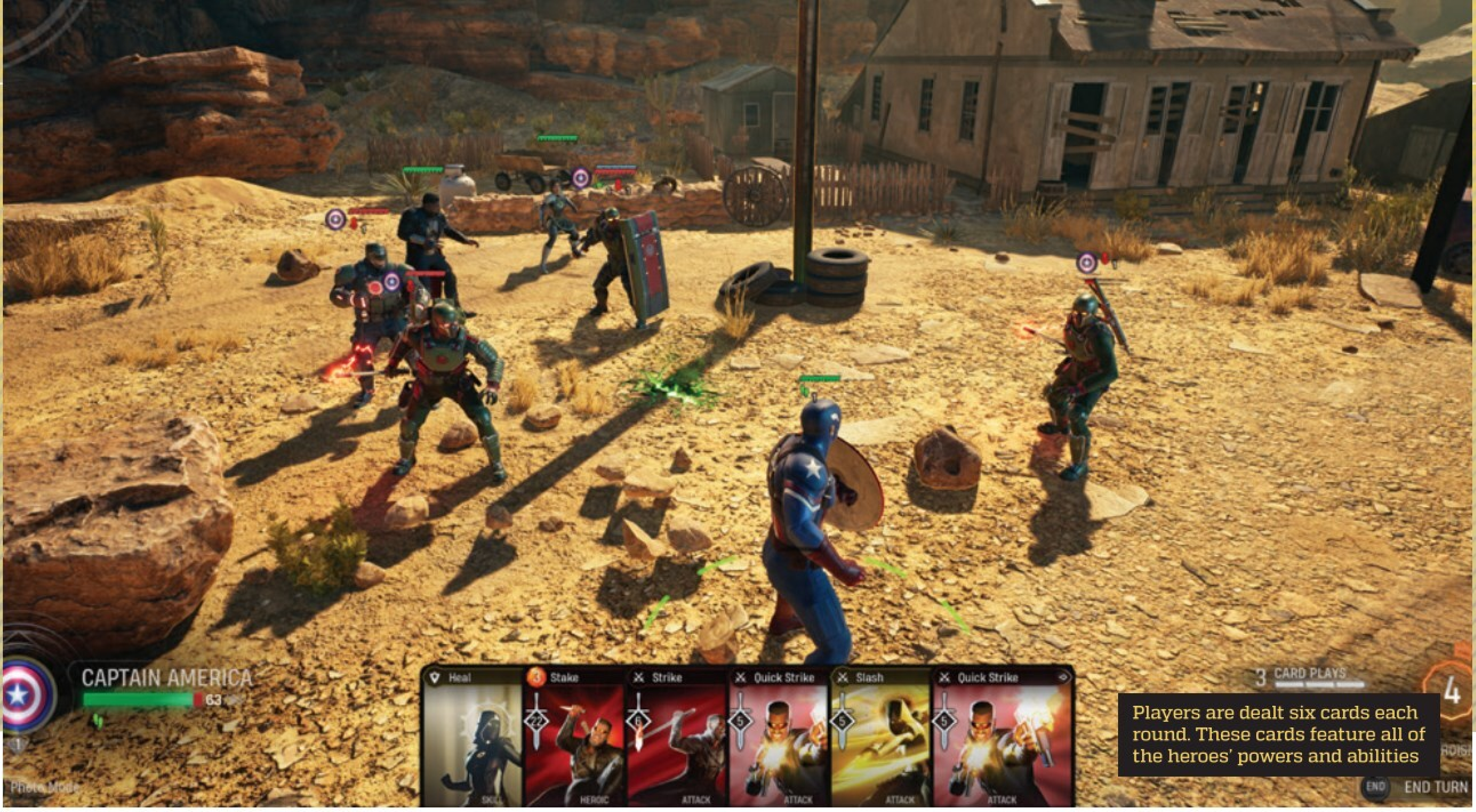
"The cool thing about Lilith being the Mother of Demons, and the aspect of her that we like is that she is a true mother," says Solomon. "She has these demonic children that are horrific and frightening to look at, but she still treats them like children, and they view her as their mother. That makes her an interesting villain … She's a true parent. I love that our Hunter and Lilith have a very asymmetric relationship where the Hunter is like, 'You're evil, I'm here to destroy you.' And Lilith is like, 'I love you. You're my child.'"

The Hunter's connection to Lilith puts them at odds with the other heroes. However, if the Midnight Suns want to stop Lilith, they may not have a choice but to fight alongside them. Even the Hunter might not be enough to stop Lilith once and for all. Fortunately, Marvel has a deep roster of characters, and Firaxis pulls from every corner of that universe. At least 12 playable heroes will be available at launch. We don't know the complete roster, but we do know that Captain America, Iron Man, Captain Marvel, and Wolverine are all playable – in addition to the Midnight Suns. Naturally, some of these heroes have more experience combating supernatural foes than others.

"To the Avengers, The Midnight Suns – Blade, Robbie, Nico, Magik – are young upstarts," says director of narrative Chad Rocco. "To the Suns, The Avengers are the old guard. They're coming in and taking over now that the stakes are high. The Avengers may have experience. They may be uber-powerful, but they're out of their element in this supernatural fight. As much as the Suns want a seat at the grown-up table, they still have learning to do. This tension between them, between these families, drives our story."

For some, Marvel's Midnight Suns may be a darker take on the Marvel universe, but it is a playful take on horror. "I think the best way to describe our narrative is that we are *Raiders of the Lost Ark*; we are not *Nightmare on Elm Street*," says Solomon. "We are supernatural, and we have creepy moments, but it is generally a fun take on it … As serious as the subject matter is, and as serious as the story is at moments, this is not an overly serious, broody game. There is a lot of humor."

Midnight Suns is based on a classic '90s comic run called Rise of the Midnight Sons. Firaxis wanted to change the spelling to Midnight Suns to reflect how the team now has a wider gender inclusivity



Players are dealt six cards each round. These cards feature all of the heroes' powers and abilities

CARD-BASED HEROICS

After resurrecting the Hunter, the Midnight Suns learn that Hydra is using experimental gamma science on some of the magical artifacts they ransacked from Doctor Strange's sanctum. This info leads the Suns to the front door of Doctor Faustus' lab. Comic fans may be familiar with this criminal mastermind who psychologically manipulates his enemies. In Firaxis' version of the Marvel Universe, Faustus leads a fringe section of Hydra obsessed with the occult.

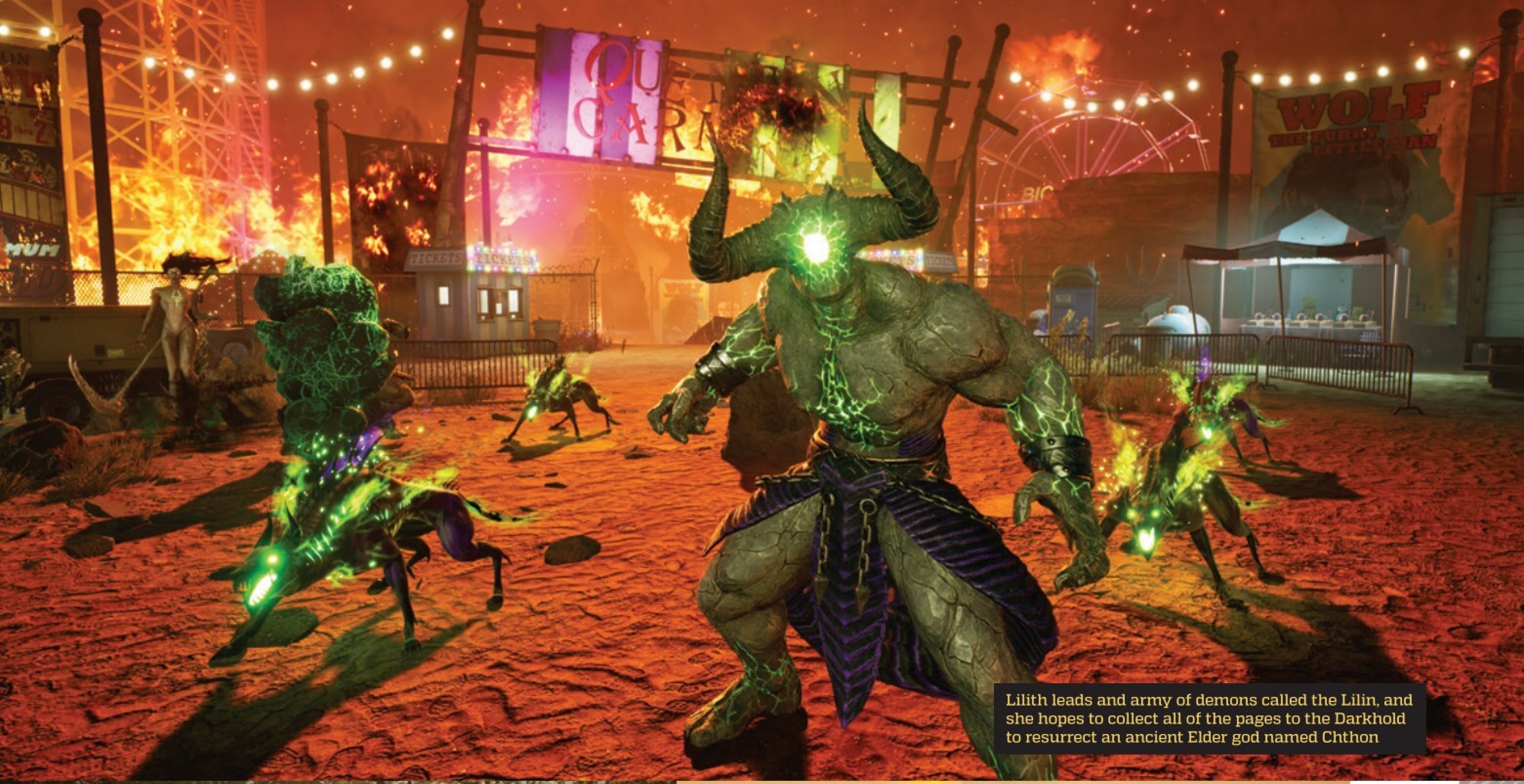
"In our world, Hydra started as an offshoot of an old cult of Chthon," says Rocco. "As they grew in power and the world modernized, they became the more mainstream Hydra that we all know: a military organization trying to take over the world. But there was always this little fringe element led by people like Faustus."

Resurrecting Lilith was Faustus' big moment, but it was a mistake, because now he has to contend with the Midnight Suns. During our demo, I lead the Hunter, Captain Marvel, and Blade on an assault on his lab. Players only take three heroes into most battles, which is a smaller team than XCOM fans are used to, but that's not the only significant difference between Midnight Suns and XCOM. Battles in Midnight Suns average around 10 to 15 minutes, keeping the action moving at a refreshing pace. These combat encounters also occur in open, hand-crafted arenas, so none of the environments are procedurally generated. However, one of the most striking changes is the lack of a grid or cover opportunities. The superheroes of Midnight Suns are nothing like the fragile soldiers of XCOM; these iconic powerhouses don't need to take cover, and they dish out spectacular attacks with ease.

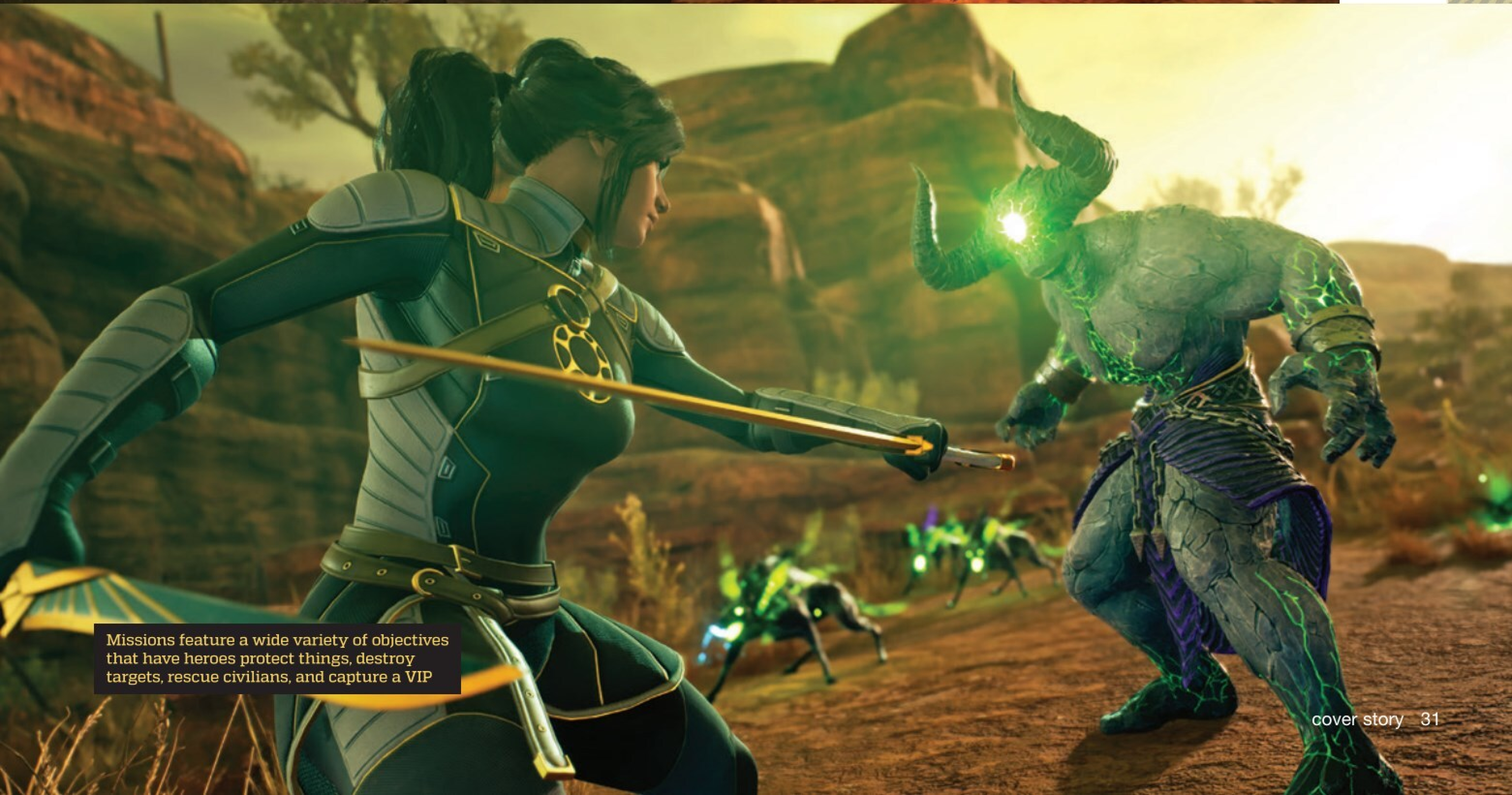
"Even from the beginning, we kind of knew we couldn't do what we've done before," says Solomon. "It was like, 'Well, we could do something completely new. We could push the genre again and go a completely different direction than what we've done before.' But I don't think we realized how far we would move away from what we'd done before. Once we got into it, very quickly, we were like, 'Oh boy, we're doing something brand new.' It's still tactics. It's still what we do, but it's brand new."

Undoubtedly the most significant change to Firaxis' take on tactical combat is the introduction of card-based attacks. Playing cards represent every hero ability. Many cards are basic attacks, but support cards heal and otherwise buff your heroes. These cards are shuffled into a deck and dealt to players at the beginning of each round. Generally, players can play three cards each turn, but like in all good strategy games, there are ways to manipulate the system. For example, some cards give you the chance to play an additional card if you defeat an enemy with that attack, while another attack can chain through multiple enemies within a set range.

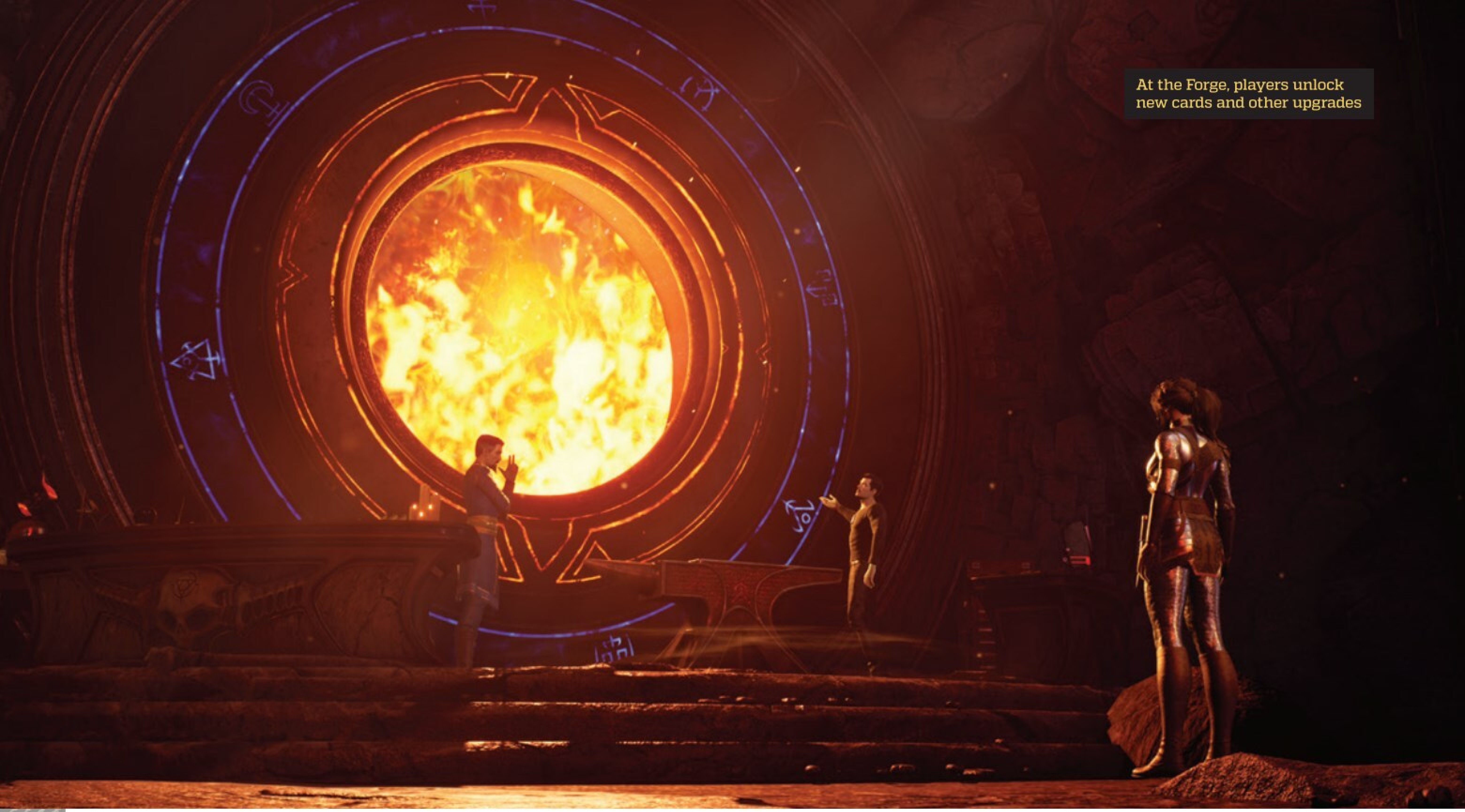
Every hero has their own set of cards tailored to their unique abilities. Blade is a straightforward damage-dealer, but some of his cards allow him to apply bleed to enemies or steal health to heal himself. Ghost Rider is more of a loose cannon. His attacks are potent, but many come at a cost, meaning he might also damage himself or an ally. Captain America is a mix between a damage dealer and a tank that can absorb a lot of damage. Meanwhile, Doctor Strange is a support character, so many of his abilities allow players to draw extra cards or augment the powers of other cards.



Lilith leads and army of demons called the Lilin, and she hopes to collect all of the pages to the Darkhold to resurrect an ancient Elder god named Chthon



Missions feature a wide variety of objectives that have heroes protect things, destroy targets, rescue civilians, and capture a VIP



At the Forge, players unlock new cards and other upgrades

Like the rest of the heroes, the Hunter has their own set of abilities, and while players can customize each character's deck, the Hunter's suite of skills is extra elastic. Broadly speaking, their powers are a balance between light and dark. Light powers are support skills that allow you to heal your team and augment your allies' skills, while dark powers are devastating damage attacks. Naturally, some of the most potent attacks come with a cost, so you might end up damaging yourself or inadvertently restricting your companions' movements in some way.

"When we first talked about [cards], we were like, 'It's kind of a crazy idea,'" says Solomon. "But then we realized there was so much that comes out of it. One is that every turn is interesting in a way that a lot of other tactics games aren't. Even games we've made before where it's like, 'Yeah, I can do the same thing every time. Over multiple turns, I'm doing basically the same thing with basically the same set of tools.' But when we added cards, every turn we're dealing you a hand of new abilities, and every turn is different than last time. The great thing is, if you get the right mix of abilities, you can break the game … It allows you to have these moments where everything is over the top, which is very appropriate for this game."

"At Firaxis, [our designs often] start with classic board game mechanics and paper prototypes," adds senior franchise producer Garth DeAngelis. "[Midnight Suns'] early physical prototypes were fun, but they also contained fixed abilities. There was something missing to keep it interesting turn-over-turn. Cards were an answer. We were playing other types of games at the time, like Slay the Spire and SteamWorld Quest … and I remember thinking

3
Daywalker
3
HEROIC
Chain 4
Deal damage to up to 4 targets.
© 2021 MARVEL

Each hero performs differently in battle. Blade is a straight attacker, but many of his abilities let him deal bleed damage or steal life from his targets

there's no way we can put cards into this big triple-A game, but they made it work. It is an incredibly interesting system that I haven't seen in any other game, indie, or otherwise."

Some of the most devastating abilities in Midnight Suns come from a unique set of cards called Heroics. These overpowered cards deal massive damage and often have bonus effects. For example, Iron Man has a heroic card that deals a small amount of damage to every enemy onscreen. Doctor Strange has a heroic card that does a lot of damage to a single enemy and applies a weakness debuff that lowers that enemy's attack power, which is a great move to pull out for hearty enemies or bosses. Heroic cards are significant, game-changing attacks, but they also cost an additional resource called Heroism. Fortunately, players earn Heroism quickly by playing basic attack and support cards. This system adds a nice meta to combat encounters where players steadily build up Heroism so they can pull out the big guns.

"Some characters spend a lot of Heroism, and some characters generate a lot of Heroism," says Solomon. "And they can be anywhere in this sort of matrix. Nico, for example, the spirit of Nico is unpredictable. She's generally a support character, but her heroic attacks are overly powerful. However, a lot of her attacks cannot be directly aimed. It hits a random target, and then if it K.O.s that target, it just keeps going. The cool thing about her is that you can set up situations where you're like, 'Okay, I've set up the board, so she's going to nuke everybody with this one very simple attack.'"

While cards are the primary means of attack, they aren't the only way to dish out damage. Environments are full of interactive objects that heroes can use to their advantage. For example, heroes can pick up set pieces of debris and throw them at an enemy, or they might cut down a chandelier, sending it crashing down on the heads of their foes. Interacting with the environment costs Heroism, which creates a nice push and pull between interactive objects and Heroic cards. At the same time, interactive environments provide players with something to do with Heroism when they run out of Heroic cards.

Some cards even play well with the environment. During our fight with Faustus' Hydra goons, I used one of the Hunter's abilities to generate a whip of pure energy to toss an enemy across the screen. They slammed into an explosive barrel, and the resulting blast wiped out two additional Hydra soldiers. Cleaning up of the rest of Faustus' goons didn't take long. After the battle, the Midnight Suns head back to their home base. It's time for some much-needed R&R.

[redacted]

WHAT DOES MIDNIGHT SUNS MEAN FOR THE FUTURE OF XCOM?

"Nobody loves XCOM as much as we do," says creative director Jake Solomon. "I am obviously very personally tied to it, but the truth is, even if I'm not designing it, even if my team isn't making it, that doesn't mean XCOM is not going to happen. Chimera Squad is a perfect example of that. XCOM is successful, and it's an amazing game, and I hope to die making XCOM 8. That'd be the perfect way to go. "

LIVING WITH LEGENDS

In Marvel's Midnight Suns, Firaxis wants players to feel like they're fighting beside their favorite heroes. More importantly, the team wants players to feel like they are living with these superstars. The studio dreamed up a place called the Abbey to facilitate this goal, which serves as the game's central hub. The Abbey is an old monastery that resides inside a pocket dimension, protecting it from Lilith's influence. This ornate convent is a bastion for players to create new cards, upgrade their gear, and form friendships with their battle companions.

Firaxis thinks of Midnights Suns as more than a strategy game – it is an expansive RPG, and the Abbey is where many of those role-playing elements come into focus. Players can explore this massive open space at their leisure, and new areas slowly open up throughout the campaign. In the War Room, players can visit with Captain Marvel to track Hydra activity. At the Forge, Tony Stark uses resources players collect in battle to create new tech and weapons – essentially unlocking new cards for every hero in the game. Meanwhile, Blade hones the team's skills in the Abbey's training grounds, allowing players to upgrade cards. Upgrading is simple; when players acquire two copies of any card, they can combine them to produce an upgraded version. Among other things, upgraded cards do more damage and add bonus effects to attacks. For example, I upgraded the Hunter's energy

At release, Midnight Suns will feature 12 playable heroes, including: Captain America, Doctor Strange, Iron Man, and Wolverine

whip ability – which I used to toss the Hydra goon into an exploding barrel – and the upgraded card reduced its Heroic cost to zero.

Another example of Midnight Suns' RPG trappings centers on the Hunter's light/dark alignment. The Hunter is continuously at war with themselves and their inner light and dark energies. "When we say light and dark, we don't mean good and evil," explains Solomon. "The Hunter is always good. The Hunter is always in pursuit of good and only fights evil. The distinction is that a dark Hunter is more of an antihero. They believe that they will do something good, but the ends justify the means. The cost isn't as important as the result. Whereas a light Hunter believes that not only should you do good, but the way you do it is important."

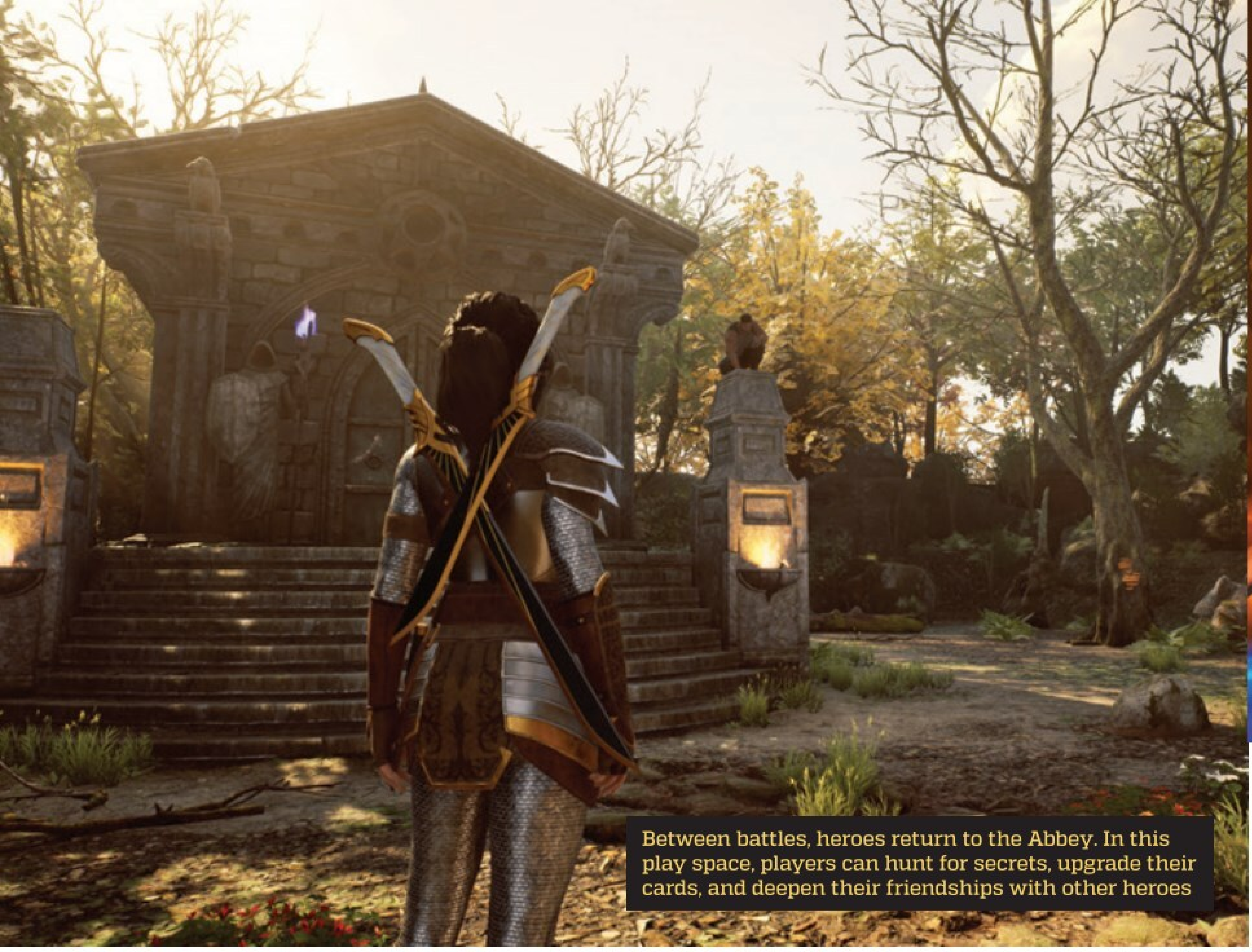
Certain things like the Hunter's Collars and unique Hunter suits are tied to the Hunter's alignment, which are a payoff for Light/Dark choices players make during conversations. These Light and Dark armors and collars each come with their own set of gameplay perks – such as stringing together a bonus card play or increasing your critical chance on the next drawn of your alignment type.

Players' choices outside combat and their interactions with other heroes are also important. Firaxis references everything from Mass Effect to Fire Emblem: Three Houses when talking about its approach to letting players get to know Midnight Suns' expansive cast. "In any given day in the Abbey, you're going to run into heroes who want to have a conversation, maybe about something serious, maybe not," says Solomon. "You're going to have the ability to hang out with these heroes. You're going to have the ability to perform quests for these heroes. Hopefully, the Abbey feels like a living space – like your dream of what a superhero headquarters can be."

Some interactions happen on a social networking app called Superlink, which Tony Stark created exclusively for superheroes. The Superlink feed looks a bit like Twitter, with heroes commenting about their day and sharing their opinions on previous battles. After our tussle with Faustus' Hydra minions, Nico Minoru invited us to watch a movie through Superlink. Accepting that invite initiates a hangout with Nico, which is essentially a short conversation full of dialogue options, and this exchange lets us get to know Nico better. The Abbey is bursting with hangout options for every hero.

"There are big gameplay rewards that come out of the heroes you befriend," says Solomon. "That's how you unlock their passive abilities. That's how you unlock devastating combo attacks that you can pull off with that hero in combat. You get unique cosmetics out of friendships. Also, each hero has a legendary ability called the Midnight Sun ability that is only attained by building the Midnight Sun suit. You only do that once you have maximized your friendship with those heroes. So, friendship is very important, in addition to being super fun."

The heroes at the Abbey won't just befriend the Hunter; they also schmooze with each other. Some heroes even have shared interests that lead them to form groups. "When you come back from battle, you may see, 'Oh, the Coven Club is meeting tonight.'" says Solomon. "That's all the witches, and they all get together and have this club, so you can join and do a club activity. Of course, that will impact some friendships in the game. There is also a shop class for people who like to work with their



Between battles, heroes return to the Abbey. In this play space, players can hunt for secrets, upgrade their cards, and deepen their friendships with other heroes

hands. There's even a book club. Interacting with these clubs is just another way to feel like these heroes have real lives and are part of a communal living space."

Marvel's iconic heroes aren't the only characters living at the Abbey, though. Lilith's sister Sarah – better known as Caretaker – manages the property. Like Lilith, Caretaker is a descendant of The Blood, so she is several hundred years old. Caretaker watched Lilith fall from grace then vowed to bring her sister to justice. It didn't take us long to learn that Caretaker is decidedly no-nonsense, but she is incredibly knowledgeable about the arcane arts and will undoubtedly be an essential ally in the battles ahead.

On the Hunter's first night back in the Abbey, they reunite with Charlie, their faithful immortal hellhound. Charlie watched the Hunter fall in battle several centuries ago. Ever since, Charlie has faithfully waited at the gravesite for her return. As the Hunter grows in experience through the campaign, they may earn new cards that allow them to summon Charlie into battle. Thankfully, Charlie also has a nose for secrets, and she helps the Hunter explore the Abbey grounds and uncover its many secrets.

"There are a lot of things that happen in the Abbey and on the grounds that are not forecast to the player," says Solomon. "With some things, there's like a 1 in 100 chance that the player is even going to see it because we wanted the Abbey to feel like a mysterious place where you're like, 'What was that? Did you hear this last night?' Or you randomly pick up a journal entry in the library and say, 'Wait! That reveals something about what is happening over here.' The community is going to have to work together to piece together some of these secrets."

THE MIDNIGHT SUN RISES

As our time with Marvel's Midnight Suns drew to a close, we couldn't escape the "just one more turn" itch that makes the best tactical games so compelling. Firaxis mastered those strategic elements with the XCOM series, and it's bringing that knowledge of deep strategic play to a brand new world. That journey hasn't been easy; Marvel's Midnight Suns and XCOM are polar opposites in many ways.

"I remember there was a period of maybe four days where we were like, 'How can we take what we've done before and put superheroes in cover?' That didn't last too long," says DeAngelis. "XCOM went by the wayside because this needed its own pillars. It needed a brand new design and creative process."

"In XCOM, you're afraid of the bad guys," adds Solomon. "In Midnight Suns, generally, the bad guys should be afraid of you. In XCOM, you knew what you could do. You just couldn't pull it off every turn. In this game, whatever you do is guaranteed to happen, but you just don't know what you can do every turn … All the mechanics we brought from XCOM [didn't work here]. That was the scary part where you're like, 'Everything I knew before has served me nothing – it's served me nothing as the designer of Midnight Suns!"

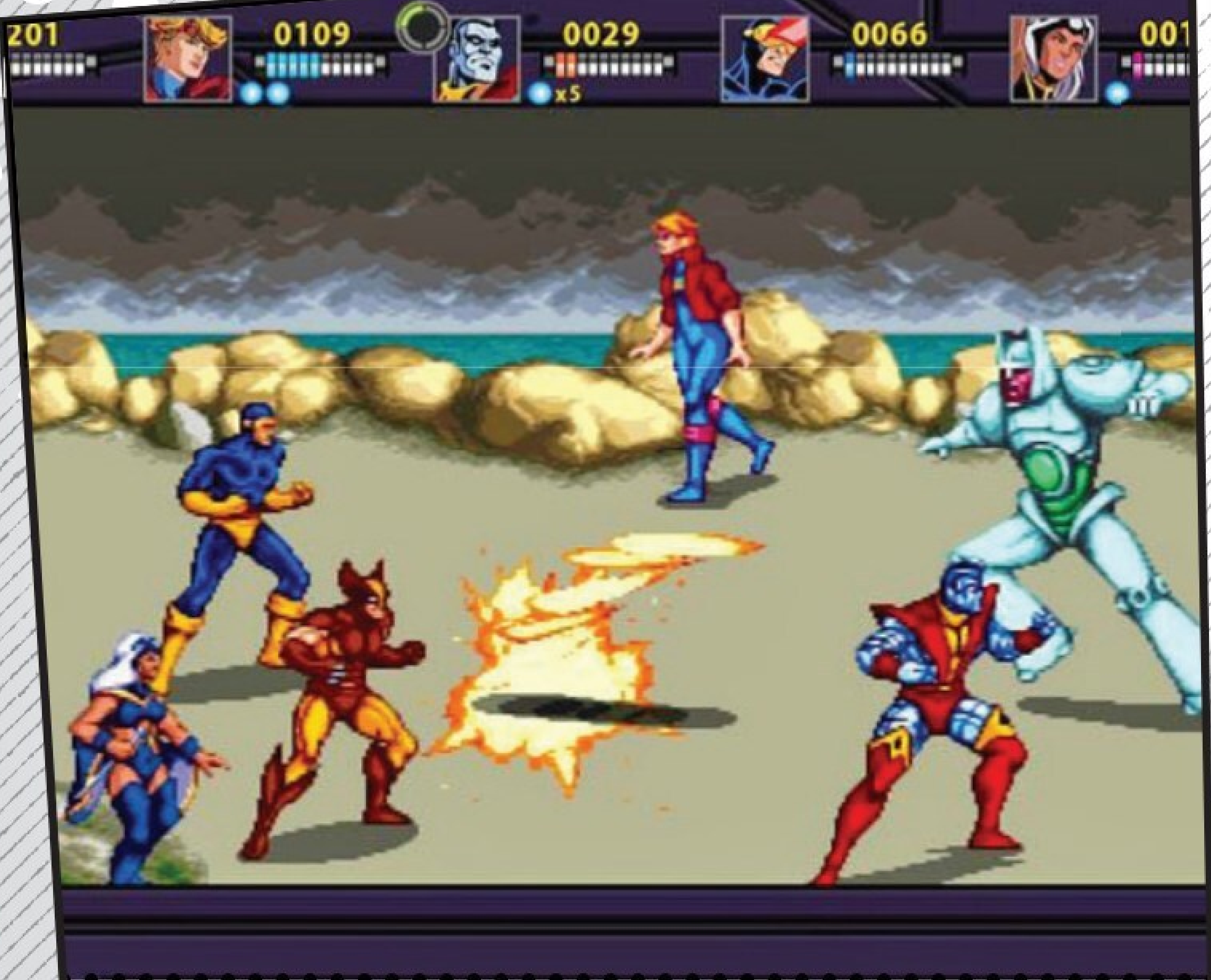
However, based on everything we've seen, the Firaxis team shouldn't be too hard on itself. Marvel's Midnight Suns is something new for the studio. It's also something new for Marvel: a meaty 40-to-60-hour RPG full of vibrant characters, rich strategic combat, heartfelt character exchanges, and epic super-heroics. Firaxis looks on track to nail every element. The team has nothing to fear – except maybe the Mother of Demons. ◆

For more on Marvel's Midnight Suns, including exclusive interviews with Firaxis, combat overviews, and hands-on impressions, head over to gameinformer.com/midnightsuns

OUR FAVORITE COMIC BOOK GAMES

GAMING AND COMIC BOOKS HAVE HAD A LONG AND FRUITFUL RELATIONSHIP. MORE THAN MANY ENTERTAINMENT MEDIUMS, THE TWO OFTEN SHARE A COMMON PURPOSE AND DIRECTION THROUGH THE NEED FOR CONCISE STORYTELLING, VISUAL FLAIR, MEMORABLE CHARACTERS, AND VISCERAL ACTION. IT'S NO SURPRISE THAT MANY OF THE CROSSOVERS AND HOMAGES INSPIRED BY COMIC BOOKS END UP FINDING GREATER SUCCESS THAN OTHER LICENSED PROPERTIES.

FOR MANY OF US, COMIC BOOK GAMES INTRODUCED US TO NEW HEROES AND VILLAINS OR OFFERED A NEW AVENUE FOR LONGTIME FANS TO INHABIT THE CAPES AND COWLS OF CHARACTERS ONLY PREVIOUSLY GLIMPSED WITHIN THE CONSTRAINTS OF A PANELED PAGE. COMIC BOOK VIDEO GAMES HAVE ALSO PROVEN THE FLEXIBILITY TO SUCCEED ACROSS VARIOUS GENRES, FROM BRAWLERS AND FIGHTING GAMES TO MMOS AND RPGS. AS ILLUSTRATED FROM SOME OF OUR PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS, COMIC BOOK GAMING HAS BEEN WITH US FOR A LONG TIME, AND WE DO NOT DOUBT MORE FAVORITES ARE YET TO COME.



X-MEN (ARCADE)

(1992)

"Triumph" is the word that first comes to mind when I think about the legendary X-Men arcade game. As a '90s kid and fanboy for *X-Men: The Animated Series*, the arcade game was everything I could've ever wanted. Not only did it look dazzling (Eh? Because Dazzler?), but it supported a whopping six players.

My brother and I always tried to conquer it but never could. Sometimes it was just us; other times, one or two kids would join in. Then the stars aligned during one fateful session. We started a new game, and another kid joined soon after. Then another. And another. Eventually, we amassed an entire six-player team for the first time. We worked as one, and it felt like we were the X-Men – strangers with different skills uniting to topple Magneto.

Eventually, we succeeded. X-Men was the first arcade game I'd ever beaten. After a round of high-fives, our fellowship disbanded as mysteriously as it formed. Sometimes, as I watch the sunset, I ponder where these heroes are today. — **MARCUS STEWART**

BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM

(2009)

Batman: Arkham Asylum begins with a long conversation between Batman and The Joker. This moment is important not just for establishing the dark conflict at hand but to show that superhero video games can be more than a showcase of powers and can slow down to focus on the characters, their opposing morality, and their history together. In this maiden release for the franchise, developer Rocksteady Studios fully explores everything that makes Batman tick. He's a demon of the night that strikes from the shadows, a martial-arts expert that can stand tall against a dozen enemies, and a skilled detective that can solve any crime.

Every inch of this game is inspired, from Arkham's soaring gothic architecture to the carefully paced gameplay flow. You feel like Batman. You care about his story. You fear his threats. And you can't wait to see how it all concludes. As an avid reader of comic books since the age of eight, Arkham Asylum was a dream come true and a game-changer for how video games handled heroes in capes and tights. **— *ANDREW REINER***

MARVEL STRIKE FORCE

(2018)

Marvel Strike Force has been my daily game for more than three years now. Upon its 2018 launch on iOS and Android, I immediately loved the character collection system, the turn-based combat, and even the resource-allocation mechanics requiring me to make the tough decisions about which characters I want to grow.

While the systems I was initially drawn to allow the developer to install predatory microtransactions (including two monthly $20 battle passes) around intentional bottlenecks, I've continued playing in the name of learning more about the Marvel Universe. I adore these characters, and even though the story is light, the roster is undeniably massive. I love learning about obscure heroes and villains as they come to Marvel Strike Force, and then when I seek out comics or watch them make their MCU debuts, it makes it that much more impactful for me, further enhancing something I already love. **— *BRIAN SHEA***

THE INCREDIBLE HULK: ULTIMATE DESTRUCTION

(2005)

Superhero games can be incredibly gratifying for comic fans. They allow us to step into the shoes of icons and live a power fantasy in ways other mediums can't match. The Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction epitomizes this experience better than most, featuring a chaotic open world that fans can tear to pieces. You control Bruce Banner in a familiar tale as the scientist attempts to reverse his mutation and eliminate his green alter ego.The classic villains are also there, but the story isn't what sticks with me 16 years later. Radical Entertainment had an uncanny knack for making you feel like Hulk. Players can leap over skyscrapers, unleash devastating energy attacks, and rip tanks to shreds as if they're made of single-ply toilet paper. Especially in an era that featured so many rushed licensed games, Ultimate Destruction stands as one of the shining examples of how to create a superb power fantasy that captures the mighty feeling of being super. — ***ALEX STADNIK***

CITY OF HEROES

(2004)

I grew up in the '90s reading comic books and watching iconic shows like *Batman: The Animated Series*. I was inspired by the style and otherworldly powers my favorite characters wielded and spent my adolescence drawing superheroes and filling out panels in my own comics. Then, in 2004, an MMORPG was released that not only fulfilled my inner fandom but changed my perception of what video games could be: City of Heroes.

The game was home to one of the most robust character creators I've ever seen. Heroes of all shapes, sizes, and abilities populated the streets of Paragon City – a roaring metropolis explorable by flight, super speed, teleportation, or super jumping. Whether you wanted to cover the battlefield in flames, summon mind-controlled minions to do your bidding, or fly through the air with super strength like Superman, City of Heroes allowed you to do it.

Unfortunately, the game's official servers shut down in 2012, making it the product of a bygone era. City of Heroes remains one of my favorite multiplayer games of all time, and I miss it dearly. — ***ALEX VAN AKEN***

THE WALKING DEAD

(2012)

In his Walking Dead comic book series, Robert Kirkman created a dark and gritty world, but I still wasn't prepared for what Telltale's The Walking Dead had in store. Its first season came out swinging with difficult choices, shocking cliffhangers, and memorable characters. It most struck a chord with the tender relationship between protagonist Lee and a young girl named Clementine. Clementine was left to fend for herself and, through Lee, we had to protect, raise, and prepare her for this harsh world.

It's one thing to read or watch events play out in Kirkman's unforgiving landscape; it's another to actually be behind the wheel, making the decisions. Telltale nailed what made the comic so popular, quickly establishing that no character was safe and constantly providing reasons to second-guess who can be trusted when people are at their worst. The first season's memorable ending made me cry. I expected the zombie guts and tension, but not that kind of emotional investment. — ***KIMBERLEY WALLACE***

MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN

(2018)

Spider-Man will always be a game near and dear to my heart, even if I have no personal attachment to the character. Insomniac's 2018 game wouldn't usually be something I'd enjoy, but it was the circumstances in which I played that made it memorable.

I got Spider-Man the day after surgery. I had cancer and had to have an operation to amputate the part of my body with the tumor. It was scary, I was young, and I was in immense pain on top of everything else. And while Spider-Man didn't change any of these facts, it did become one of my only escapes for that entire excruciating week.

Spider-Man is a rare game I've completed to 100 percent. I played through the story, crushed every side-quest, and found every collectible – all within a matter of a week or two. I also just swung around New York for hours, going up and down, here and there, and all the way back. With nothing else to do, Spider-Man, despite all the things I didn't like, is still a game I cherish for getting me through one of the worst stretches of my life. **— BLAKE HESTER**

SPIDER-MAN AND VENOM: MAXIMUM CARNAGE

(1994)

Spider-Man and Venom: Maximum Carnage was released on the SNES back in 1994 and to this day remains my go-to comic-inspired game. We've had many incredible experiences through the years, but this was my first video game rooted in the realm of comics that I played growing up. Its portrayal of the notoriously evil Carnage will forever remain cemented in my head. There are no redemptive qualities for this character, and that's okay – that's how he was written, and that no-gray element was beautifully executed in Maximum Carnage.

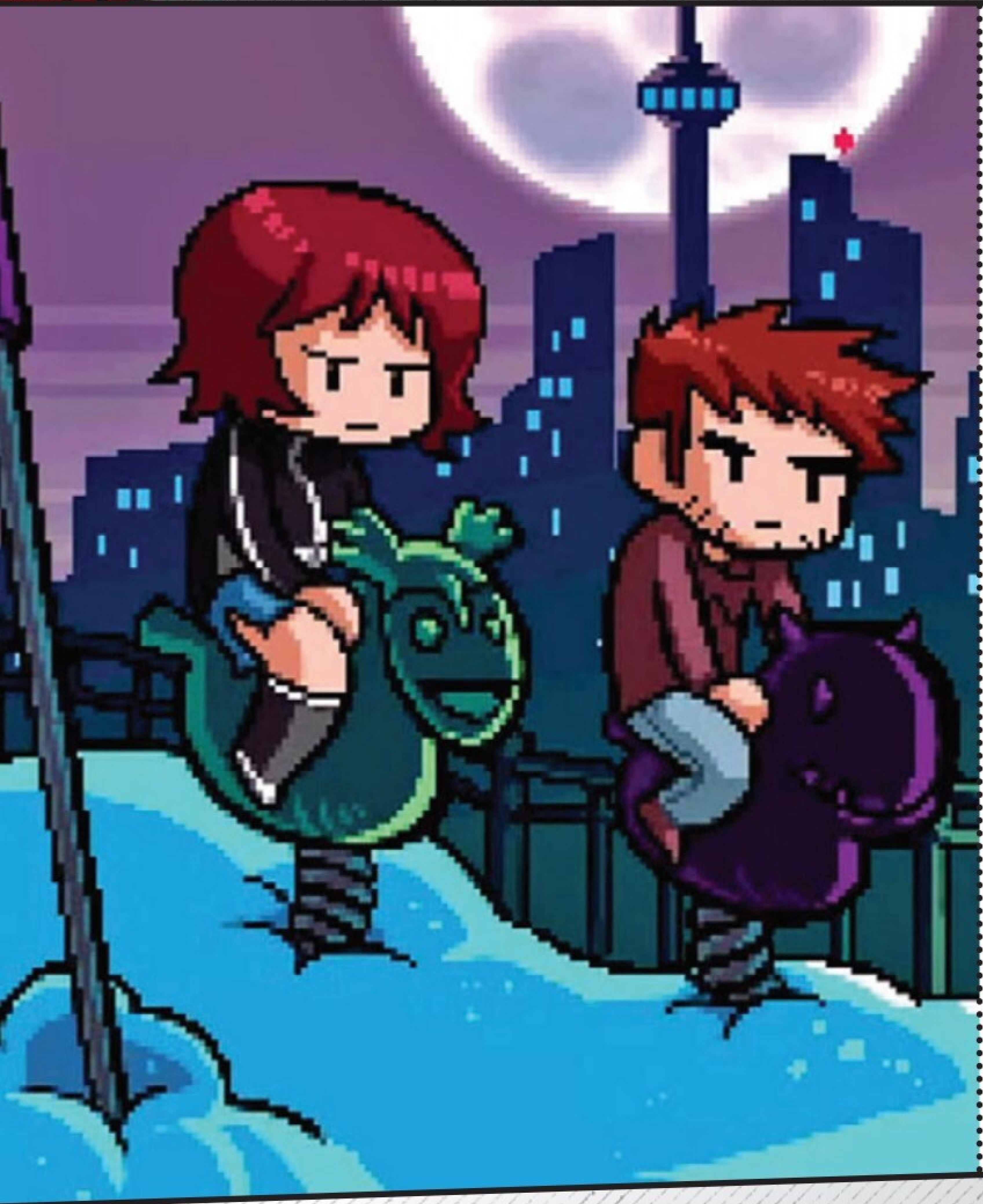
It's a single-player side-scrolling beat 'em up Marvel ride in which both Spider-Man and Venom unabashedly go after their foes, including the chaotic Carnage himself. After he escapes incarceration to cause as much destruction as possible, players control Spidey and Venom as they try to minimize the chaos, leading to a wild ride for a Marvel fan. Pair that with the comic book-styled cutscenes and the storyline reflection of the Maximum Carnage comic arc itself, and you've got the perfect side-scrolling adventure. Plus, it has Firestar and Black Cat as characters, as well, two characters who don't get nearly the love they deserve. — ***LIANA RUPPERT***

X-MEN LEGENDS

(2004)

It was hard to escape the X-Men in the '90s. Marvel's merry mutants were all over comic stands, arcades, Saturday morning cartoons, and even Pizza Hut commercials. As a teenager, Marvel's super-powered social misfits resonated strongly with me. I spent dozens and dozens of hours playing the X-Men titles on the Sega Genesis, but I truly longed for a game that would let me cut loose with these mutant's abilities. I wanted a meatier adventure – something like a Diablo-style action/RPG.

Raven Software must have heard my prayers because, in 2004, the studio released X-Men Legends for PlayStation 2, Xbox, and GameCube. This 4-player co-op adventure let me feel like a superhero in ways few games had before. Nightcrawler could teleport through walls, or Colossus could tear them down, and you could customize each hero as you upgraded their uncanny abilities. Future titles, such as Marvel: Ultimate Alliance, refined this formula, but I'll always have a soft spot in my heart for the original. — ***BEN REEVES***



SCOTT PILGRIM VS. THE WORLD: THE GAME

(2010)

After years of reading comics, the Scott Pilgrim graphic novels were an intriguing addition to my reading habits when they fell into my lap in the mid-2000s. The strange mix of slacker culture, magical realism, sharp dialogue, and deceptively sophisticated art combined to make those stories unlike anything I'd encountered. As such, I was especially excited that the 2010 game turned out to be just as quirky and wonderful.

Leveraging the whimsical pixel art and animation talents of Paul Robertson, the 2D side-scrolling brawler felt like the perfect genre to capture Scott's battles against Ramona Flowers' seven evil exes. The beat 'em-up sent my mind back to dim-lit arcades, pumping quarters into machines with my friends by my side. Decades later, it was thrilling to get the same sense of excitement playing on a modern console, this time sitting beside buddies on a couch and laughing about how perfectly the game captured the one-of-a-kind aesthetic found in the Scott Pilgrim adventures.

— MATT MILLER

MARVEL VS. CAPCOM 2: NEW AGE OF HEROES

(2000)

It wasn't hard for me to fall in love with Marvel vs. Capcom 2's stacked cast of fan favorites and deep cuts. My Marvel knowledge used to rely on cartoons and games of the '90s, but fighting games have an uncanny ability to distill the essence of characters through incredible sprite work and exuberant move sets. Within minutes of playing a hero or villain, I had a grasp of their powers through regular attacks and screen-filling super moves. This introduction was a start, but I needed to know more.

I had no idea who Cable, Blackheart, or Spiral were until I played MVC2, and it led me down countless rabbit holes of research online and in the pages of comics to find out. Who is this bubbly Thanos guy? What in the world is a Shuma Gorath? Why does this second Wolverine have bones for claws? To this day, I can thank Marvel vs. Capcom 2 for keeping my love of fighting games alive through the mid-2000s and reigniting my interest in comic books and superheroes, giving me a foundation to enjoy the last decade of Marvel content.

— JOHN CARSON

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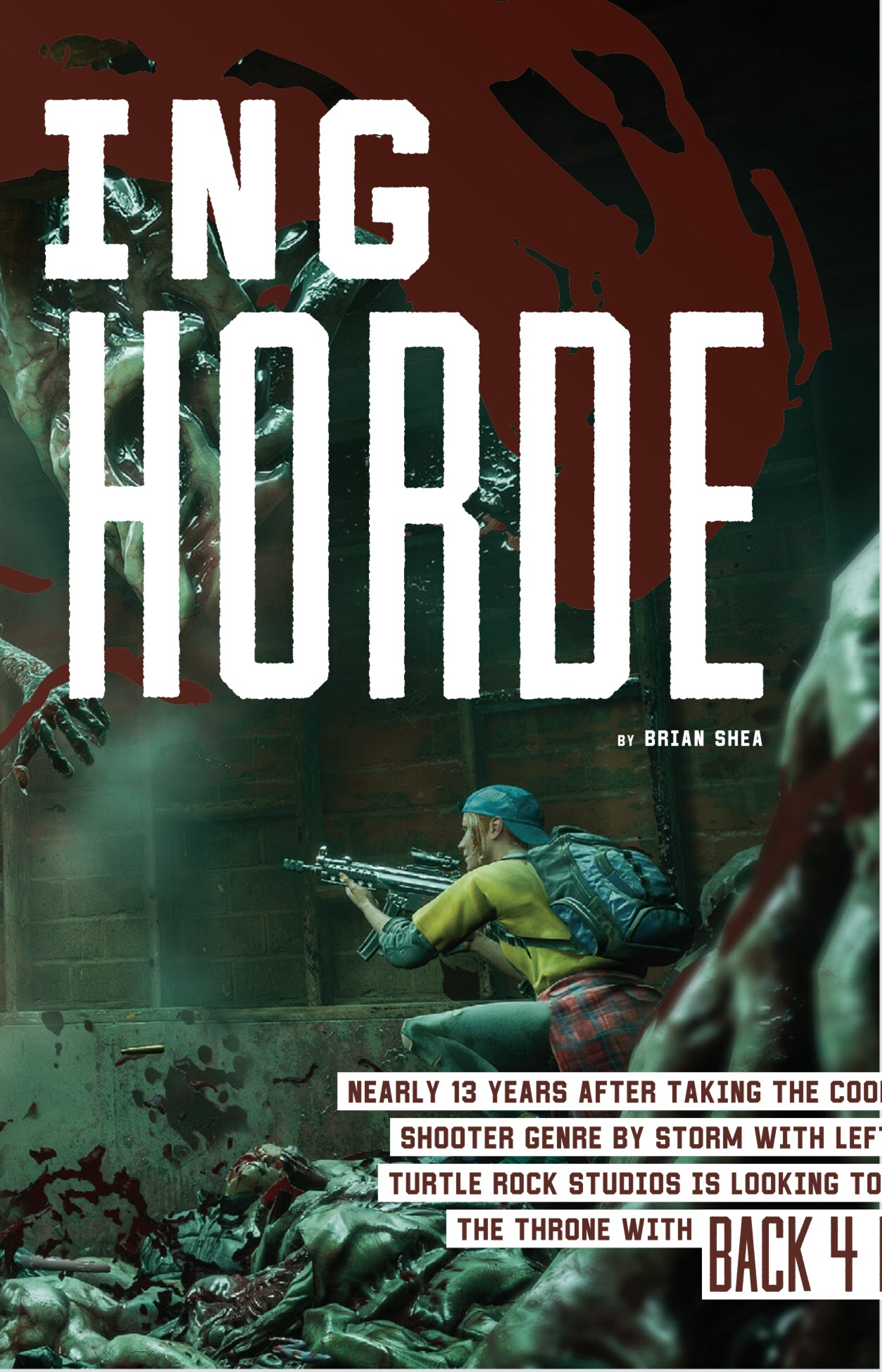


ING HORDE

BY **BRIAN SHEA**

NEARLY 13 YEARS AFTER TAKING THE COOPERATIVE SHOOTER GENRE BY STORM WITH LEFT 4 DEAD, TURTLE ROCK STUDIOS IS LOOKING TO RECLAIM THE THRONE WITH BACK 4 BLOOD

» **PLATFORM**
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **STYLE**
8-Player Online Shooter

» **PUBLISHER**
Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment

» **DEVELOPER**
Turtle Rock Studios

» **RELEASE**
October 12

Founded in 2002, Turtle Rock Studios got its start working on the Counter-Strike and Half-Life series alongside Valve. However, the studio truly made its name through its first all-original game, a cooperative zombie shooter called Left 4 Dead. Valve was so impressed by the project that it acquired Turtle Rock in 2008 and released the game later that year. Left 4 Dead was a smash hit for the developer, and both paved the way for the co-op shooting genre and contributed to a zombie explosion in gaming.

Following the studio's split from Valve in 2009 (where Valve retained the Left 4 Dead IP), Turtle Rock began work on what would eventually become the asymmetric multiplayer shooter Evolve. Valve put out a second Left 4 Dead developed in-house, and countless other studios replicated the formula to varying results. Still, few captured the magic of that first Left 4 Dead. Now, the studio that popularized the genre is back with a new effort that not only carries on the tradition of its most popular game but expands the formula in new directions.

RISING FROM THE DEAD

In the post-Valve era of Turtle Rock Studios, the team began conceptualizing asymmetric multiplayer modes where a group of players hunts down a single powerful character. That idea eventually turned into Evolve, where a group of four hunters tracks a monster through an environment, and the monster evades the hunters until it becomes powerful enough to take them on. Evolve impressed at expos and in trailers, but longer play sessions revealed cracks in the formula. When it launched in 2015, it did so to tepid critical reception and fastly-dwindling player bases.

"In hindsight, when Evolve was playing correctly and when it was on, it was really, really great," says studio co-founder and Back 4 Blood creative director Phil Robb. "But the problem was that it fell apart pretty easily whenever you had a teammate that wasn't up to the task of fulfilling their role."

The servers for Evolve shut down in 2018, leaving Turtle Rock fans to ponder the future. Thankfully, they didn't have to wait long, as mere months after the closure of Evolve, in March 2019, the studio announced Back 4 Blood.

"We had some potential projects that we worked on here and there that never saw the light of day, which sort of happens a lot more than you'd like when you're an independent developer," Robb says. "We actually worked on a lot of cool s--- during that time that we didn't really ever get to show anybody, but at some point, somebody threw the opportunity out there and said, 'Hey, how would you guys feel about getting back into the zombie space?' Of course, we're like, 'Hell yeah!' We love that genre, we like working in that space, and I feel like we'd been away from it long enough that we were anxious to get back in and start banging on that again."

Clearly drawing inspiration from the Left 4 Dead name, Back 4 Blood has been considered by many a spiritual successor of the studio's defining hit. Robb also recognizes it's a bold choice but says the developer was setting itself up since it knew people would make comparisons regardless. But as he tells it, there's more to Back 4 Blood's name than just an homage to the studio's previous games.

"There's some other sort of poetic stuff in there if you think about it," Robb says. "We had a bit of a rough time with our previous project, so we sort of felt like we're back for blood. We were happy to be back in a genre and territory we loved being in back then and feel pretty comfortable in."

The basic premise of Back 4 Blood remains true to what Left 4 Dead fans remember: You join up with a team of survivors (called Cleaners) to venture through an area infested with zombies (called Ridden) scrounging supplies and killing anything in your path. Along the way, you encounter objectives, special enemy types, and, of course, hordes upon hordes of zombies. That foundation will sound familiar to anyone who played Left 4 Dead, but the studio wasn't content with simply replicating past successes. Instead, the team re-examined every part of the formula to home in on what made the original special.

Along this path, Turtle Rock implemented a new cards system to help each run play out differently. While each Cleaner has some minor advantages built in (Holly grants additional stamina to the team while Evangelo gives everyone a slight speed boost), the deeper modifiers come from these cards. Before entering a session, you assemble a deck from your collection to bring with you. Then when you enter your game, you draw cards and apply different modifiers for that playthrough.

Card systems like this have appeared in several games, but Turtle Rock didn't want to shoehorn the mechanic in if it wasn't the right fit. "I was even skeptical of it a little bit at first, but it's totally grown on me," Robb says. "I think at the end of the day when you play Left 4 Dead, you had a certain degree of agency in that you know you could go where you wanted, there was a number of weapons you could choose from, and then it was kind of just skill, and that was about it. With this, we introduced a lot more player agency, which I think is a welcome addition to the genre."

These cards do things like provide extra health or damage, improve your reload speed, or give you an extra life in the session. Some even affect the entire squad, like one I equipped that increased ammo capacity for my whole team. I was initially uncertain of this system, but as I played multiple runs of the same mission, I enjoyed the random elements that help keep the experience fresh. In addition, since you can build your deck, it's easier to complement your desired playstyle through cards meant for support, damage-dealing, scavenging, and more.

RUNNING FOR OUR LIVES

After a quick stop in Fort Hope (see sidebar) to gather my co-op partners, we jump into the opening campaign, The Devil's Return. This action-packed string of missions tasks us with blasting our way through an industrial park, crossing an overrun bridge, and blowing up a cruise ship, but first, we need to choose our cards, including a corruption card, which adds a modifier or bonus objective to the entire match. Since this is our first match in Back 4 Blood, I keep it simple, making it so if we get to the saferoom without any of us dying, we get extra copper, the in-match upgrade currency.

You start each session with a meager amount of copper, allowing you to upgrade your starting loadout in the initial saferoom. I decide to save my copper for next time, opting for the free automatic rifle sitting on the chair. Once we're all geared up, we unlatch the lock and begin bashing and blasting.

The early goings of this stage take place in a dilapidated apartment complex. While the sorry state of the building is terrible news for those without renter's insurance, the loot found in the rooms gives us plenty to pick up. In just this early section, I grab extra copper and some medical supplies in case things get hairy later. Of course, these apartments are not without zombie residents, but we dispatch these basic Ridden with little hassle.

FORT HOPE

Upon starting the game, players land in Fort Hope. This new base of operations for the player provides the ability to gear up for your next session. While here, you can assemble your co-op and competitive decks using cards you either find in the missions or earn through the game's Supply Lines progression system. Supply Lines give new cards plus cosmetics like sprays, weapon skins, and more through tokens you earn in PvE and PvP.

While in Fort Hope, you can also get some practice at the shooting range, which allows you to blast targets with the wide assortment of weapons in Back 4 Blood. It also tells you how much damage you're dealing, so you can easily find which guns are your deadliest. This hub area isn't the most robust we've ever seen, but it serves as a solid place to gather your friends, progress and customize your characters, and get ready to jump into the game.

Our first task completed, we lower a bridge that lets us get from one rooftop to another. The noise attracts a horde of Ridden, and we begin fighting off the undead creeps. Thankfully, a doorway on the other roof serves as an effective bottleneck, and one of my teammates who spent their copper lofts on a Molotov cocktail, takes out a considerable fraction of the encroaching enemies. Maybe I should have bought some supplies after all.

Once I get to the second saferoom, I decide to take advantage of the offerings. I have a decent amount of currency to spend, so I refill my rifle ammo and grab a grenade, but I'm eyeing the team support upgrade that gives all healing items extra effectiveness. I don't have enough copper to purchase it this time, but I decide to scrounge in subsequent stages to give my team that handy upgrade.

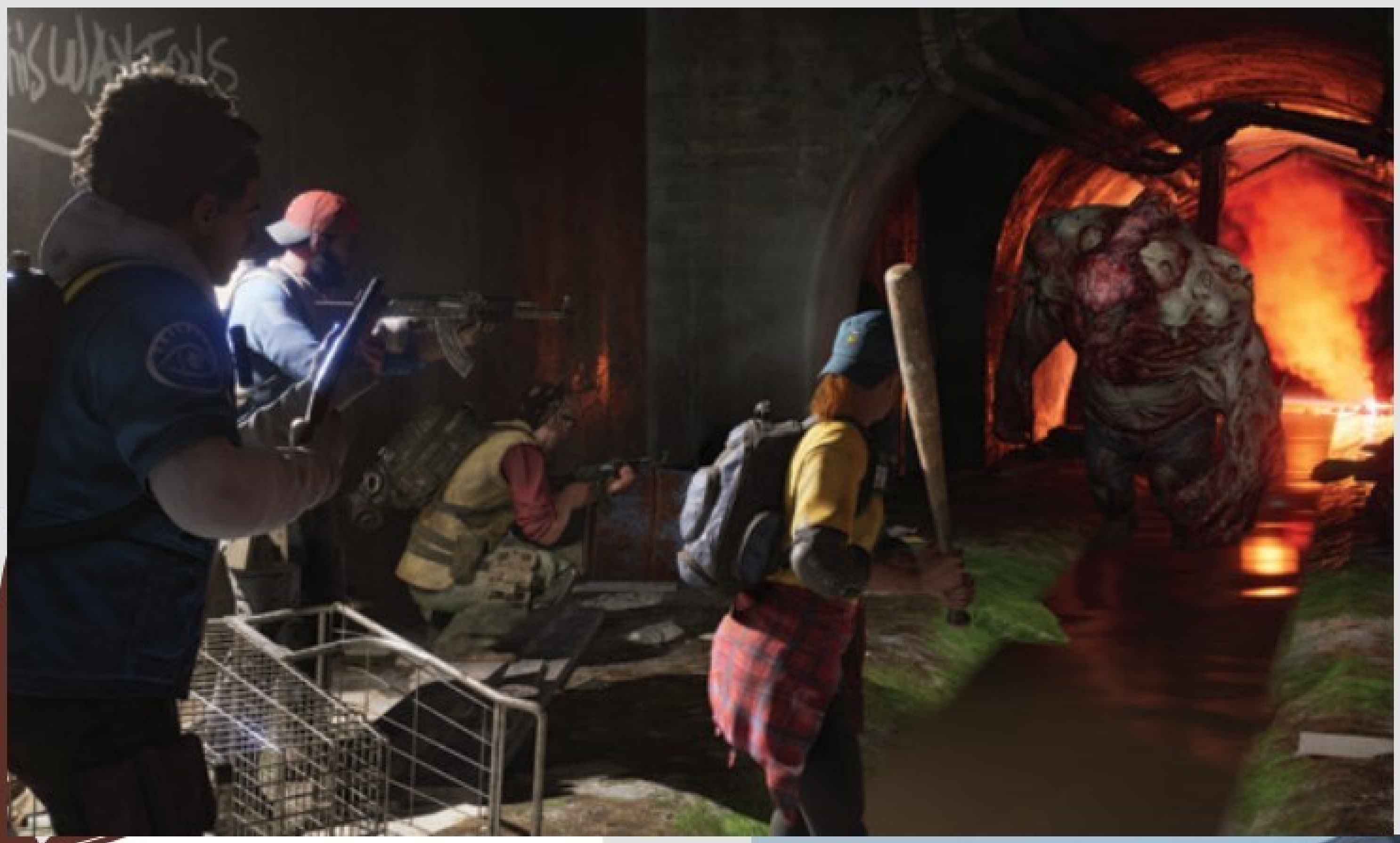
The mid-point climax of this campaign occurs as a Ridden the size of a building emerges from the ground. The Ogre enemy type is a powerful, hulking boss that can throw projectiles from a distance or get in close and swipe at you. Our first encounter with the Ogre results in it escaping before we can deplete its health, but it reemerges later in the act to try and finish us off. Thankfully, we're able to shoot its weak points enough to cause the massive beast to collapse.

While the Left 4 Dead inspiration is evident in nearly every facet of Back 4 Blood, Turtle Rock hasn't completely thrown out the Evolve playbook. "I think you especially see those influences when you look at the Ogre," says executive producer Lianne Papp. "We use a lot of those experiences from past titles to help develop that kind of experience and make it an awesome moment because I feel like it's something you don't really see in a zombie shooter: something that's multiple stories tall and towering over you. It adds that extra element of, 'Oh s---!'"

Though the Ogre serves as a definite highlight of the first campaign, it's far from the finale. After fighting through a trainyard, we approach a corroded bridge that appears to have been a chokepoint for the survivors to escape. From the looks of it, not many did.

Not only are there zombies galore on this bridge, but also several variants. The Crusher stands close to 15 feet tall and has a giant arm that will squeeze you to death unless you have a stun gun or a teammate who can help. The Hocker is a tiny, agile Ridden who stalks you from afar and spits your way, trapping you in a sticky, spider-web-like substance. Those two might be among the most dreaded variants to face, but I never enjoyed seeing Reekers waddle my way. Not only can this zombie type vomit acid and inflict corrosive, area-of-effect damage, but some of them explode when you kill them, dealing heavy concussive damage to nearby Cleaners.

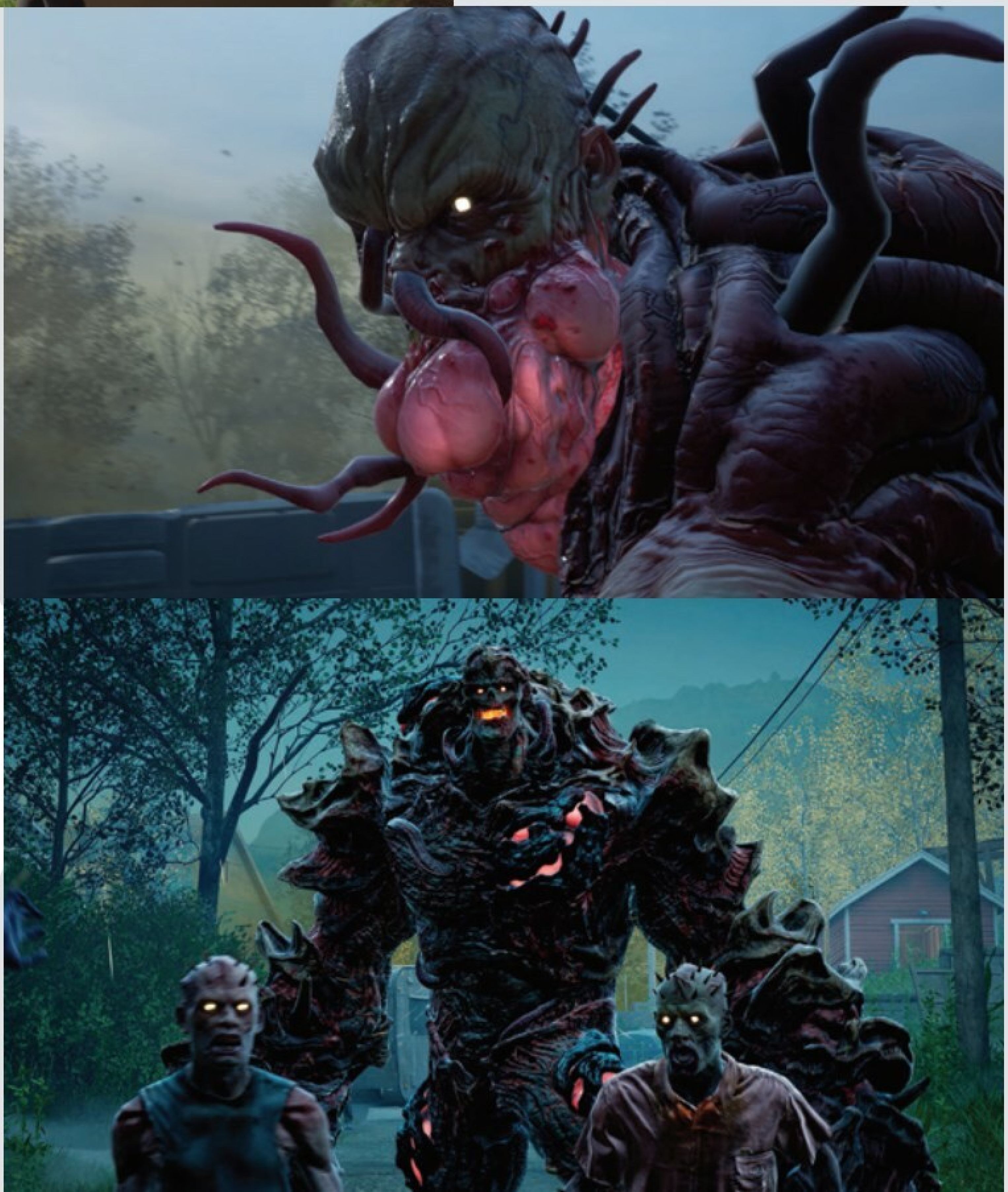
After a mad dash across the bridge, we come to the only thing connecting the Ridden-infested side to the survivor stronghold: a cruise ship. We make it to the other side, but the only way to sever the connection is to plant explosives throughout the boat and blow it up. Unfortunately, the explosives start their countdowns the moment we place them, so efficiency is of the essence.



KEEP 'EM COMING BACK 4 MORE

Back 4 Blood launches in October with multiple co-op campaigns and a fun, competitive multiplayer mode, but Turtle Rock has plans for post-launch content and updates. In addition to improvements through patches, the studio is also contemplating DLC, including maps, characters, and campaigns.

If the party leader owns the paid DLC in the cooperative campaigns, the entire party can access the content. In competitive multiplayer, players can earn new playable characters and zombie types through an in-game progression for free. In addition, all PvP players have access to the same cards, regardless of whether those players purchased the associated content drops.



All the activity on the ship has attracted a horde of Ridden, making it even tougher to escape in time, and the results show it. The ship explodes just as our sole surviving teammate leaps from the ledge and lands on solid ground. The rest of the team has perished in the blast, but we count it as a success.

After completing the first campaign, we can tackle Blue Dog Hollow, a new group of missions. This campaign takes place in a more wooded area than the industrial park of The Devil's Return. Throughout this mission, you encounter farms the zombies turned into nests, a dark tunnel swimming with Ridden, and an abandoned church you must fortify and defend against waves of the undead. However, the Sleeper is the horrifying new highlight of this campaign. These grotesque creatures serve as sentries on the wall. If someone is oblivious enough to walk past, it lunges out at them, delivering one heck of a jump-scare.

The Devil's Return and Blue Dog Hollow demonstrate just how different the campaigns can be, leaving me hopeful that the rest of the PvE content will continue to deliver distinct twists on the formula Turtle Rock has established. However, for those wanting a different experience escaping the PvE formula, you can also take on other players online through competitive PvP.

TURNING THE TABLES

While the most significant content seems to be in the cooperative campaigns, Back 4 Blood also features a full competitive PvP mode. The competitive mode puts you on opposing sides of the zombie apocalypse; one team of four players controls the human Cleaners, while the other gets to walk among the infected as powerful Ridden variants.

"I think it's something a lot of people want," Papp says. "You're playing a zombie shooter, or you're playing against monsters of some sort, and then inevitably there are people that go, 'I want to be the monster. I want to be on the other side.' It's giving in to that kind of fantasy and providing people an opportunity to do that."

After selecting characters and cards, the Cleaners enter a brief scavenge phase where they can explore the map to see what items and weapons they can stock up on before the Ridden descend upon them. Once the timer hits zero, all hell breaks loose, so they had better be prepared.

This mode lets you become the special Ridden types you see in the campaign and turn that feeling of dread into one of delight. Charging toward an isolated survivor as a Crusher and putting the squeeze on them is empowering but playing as the Ridden is most rewarding when coordinating with your teammates. For example, we noticed the Cleaners were hunkering down in a series of closed-in buildings on one map, so we chose Reekers and Exploders with their acid vomit and explosive deaths. As soon as we spawned, we rushed into the rooms and filled them with acid, ending the round swiftly.

Rounds are scored based on how long the Cleaners can survive. Once the Ridden overtake the Cleaners and kill the entire team, the roles reverse, and the zombie players change into Cleaners to see if they can beat the established time. The matches operate on a best-of-three basis, with the hordes thickening and the playable area shrinking the longer the round goes on.

While many players are eagerly looking forward to experiencing the co-op campaigns, Turtle Rock hopes this will serve as a terrific side dish to that main attraction. "[We wanted to] have something that didn't feel like a major time investment," Papp says. "A term I've stolen from someone else in the industry is 'snackable.' I really love our PvP mode because you can just jump in, enjoy it for a little bit, your palms get sweaty, and then you can step back, drink a glass of water, take it easy, and then jump in again. You're not committing yourself to a multi-hour experience."

READY TO FEAST

While many players have already gotten their hands on Back 4 Blood through various alpha and beta tests, we still have a lot to learn about the game. Turtle Rock Studios certainly thinks the game appeals to the fervent community waiting for a worthy Left 4 Dead successor. We won't know how much staying power Back 4 Blood has until after its launch, but the foundation is absolutely in place for players to have more fun than should be allowed in the apocalypse. ◆

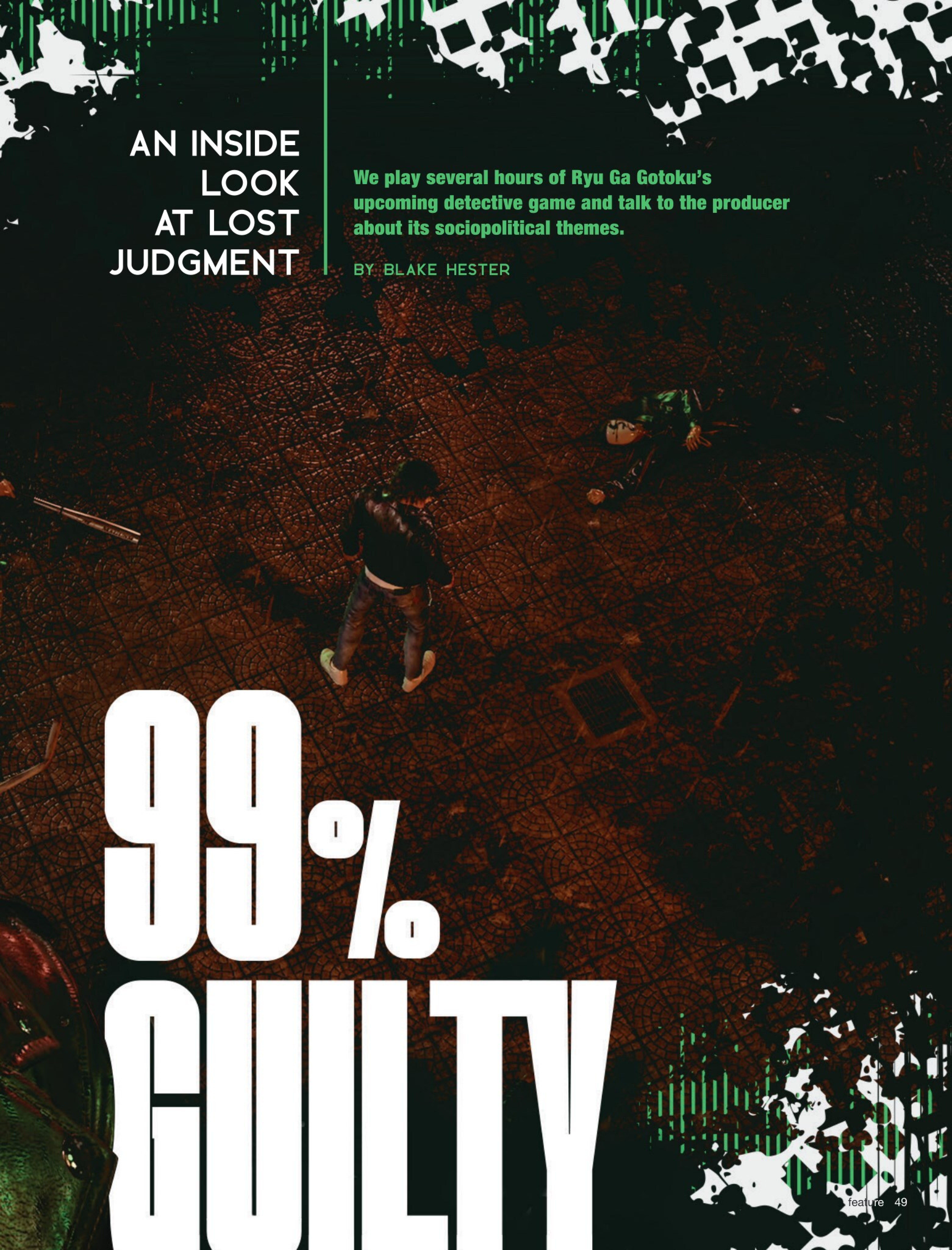
» **PLATFORM**
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One

» **STYLE**
1-Player Action

» **PUBLISHER**
Sega

» **DEVELOPER**
Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio

» **RELEASE**
September 24



AN INSIDE LOOK AT LOST JUDGMENT

We play several hours of Ryu Ga Gotoku's upcoming detective game and talk to the producer about its sociopolitical themes.

BY BLAKE HESTER

99% GUILTY

IN JAPAN, MORE THAN 99% OF COURT TRIALS END IN CONVICTION. It's a staggering number and one not without controversy. In recent years, people have come forward claiming they were wrongly convicted. Unsurprisingly, the Japanese judicial and policing systems are the focal points of a lot of the controversy.

Shoji Sakurai spent 29 years in prison after being convicted of a murder-robbery. After that, he fought for 15 years for a not-guilty verdict in a retrial. In 2013, Sakurai told the BBC about his experiences being interrogated. How, before he was even convicted, the police treated him like a criminal, breaking him down until he signed a confession.

“They interrogated me day and night, telling me to confess. After five days, I had no mental strength left, so I gave up and confessed,” Sakurai told the outlet.

In recent years, many Japanese games feature strong condemnations of the country's judicial systems and the powers that be. Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio (RGG) is at the forefront, the developer behind the Yakuza series and its spin-off franchise, Judgment. In 2019, in the first Judgment game, the company tackled a story about wrongful convictions. In 2020, it followed that up with Yakuza: Like A Dragon, centered on corruption within the highest branches of the Japanese government. And now, with Lost Judgment, the studio is once again tackling injustices within Japanese society.

We recently had a chance to go hands-on with several levels of Lost Judgment and speak to its producer, Kazuki Hosokawa, about the game's development. Right alongside the campy gameplay RGG fans expect is a game obsessed with justice – in terms of what it means and the limits and dangers of who serves it.

BACK AGAIN

(Content warning for sexual assault)

Judgment opens in Ijincho, Yokohama, the location from Like a Dragon and the latest open world in the overall series. Firefighters are racing to a scene; smoke billows out of an abandoned building, but there are no visible signs of fire, as one firefighter points out. It strikes him as a false alarm or a prank.

His assumption is not correct.

Once inside, they survey the floor with the smoke, discovering 14 flares arranged in the shape of an arrow pointing in the direction of a large mass covered by a tarp. Flies, hundreds of them, hover around. You can't be sure until one of the firemen musters the courage to remove the tarp, but you have a pretty good idea what lies beneath. It's bad.

Removing the tarp confirms your worst fears – a dead body. But not a fresh corpse. The skin is black with decay. The hands restrained behind the back, mangled and broken. The body has been here a while, maggots and larva making themselves at home in the decomposing hole that was once a nose. The camera slowly pans towards the corpse, and right before you can't take it any longer, the screen cuts to black, and in pipes a familiar voice.

“In Japan, 99.9 percent of criminal trials end with a guilty verdict,” protagonist Takayuki Yagami says, a declaration of Lost Judgment's themes.

“The reality is, the law is neither as perfect or as fair as it's supposed to be,” he says a few moments later. “So I've made it my job to give those without a voice a chance to be heard.”

Set in December 2021, Akihiro Ehara is accused of groping a woman on a train. A bystander captures Ehara's attempt to flee on video. The event is broadcast by the news, leading to a public outcry for a maximum sentence. However, on trial, Ehara brings up the corpse in Yokohama, asking if the court has identified the person. His defense lawyer, Saori Shirosaki, a main character from the first game and one of Yagami's coworkers, asks Yagami to investigate, believing police overlooked crucial case details. Did Ehara commit two crimes at the same time? If so, how? Was his sexual battery case a cover-up? Or has he gamed Japan's justice system entirely?

“In many cases, justice is kind of fluid because it is a socially accepted concept, but at the same time, it's supported by a judicial system that has no tolerance for that fluidity,” Hosokawa says. “That's often why sometimes we feel the limitations and even the danger of equating ‘justice’ with ‘the judicial system.’ What is justice in the first place? Can the judiciary system always resolve these conflicts? These are the common themes of the [Judgment] series.”

Gameplay opens in Kamurocho, with Yagami and his detective partner, Masaharu Kaito, trailing a man their client met online. The client believes she's being conned, so Yagami resolves to get to the bottom of what's happening. It's a petty case.

Unfortunately, Lost Judgment's opening level gets off on the wrong foot. One of the most monotonous parts of the original was its tailing missions, where you had to walk behind a target and avoid their suspicion. The first thing Lost Judgment asks the player to participate in is a tailing mission, which feels like it goes on forever.

The man is conning Yagami's client out of her money. Not only that, he's doing the same to other women across Kamurocho. We trail the suspect for more than 10 minutes, taking pictures of his activities and collecting evidence. Only once is the slow pace interrupted when a group of yakuza recognizes Yagami. A fight ensues, and finally, we're introduced to the game's combat.

Historically, RGG's games have been beat 'em ups, and it's here that Lost Judgment shines. Combat is instantly fluid and chaining fast combos with heavy and light attacks combined with grapples and throws feels excellent. But beginning with Like a Dragon, the core series is now a turn-based RPG, meaning Judgment, the spin-off, is now carrying forward the main games' legacy as a brawler. It's an interesting position for a side series to be in, and Hosokawa says Lost Judgment's combat is a legitimate evolution of RGG's action systems.

"I would also say the battle system is the most advanced form of RGG Studio's action combat yet," Hosokawa says.

After completing the tailing mission, we get to test out Lost Judgment's new parkour and stealth systems. Our objective is to infiltrate a yakuza office our target enters. A guard outside the door blocks the front way in, but an open window accessible via the alley gives us an opening. Both systems are relatively rudimentary in terms of gameplay. Still, they work well enough, and there's something to be said about how they break up the tried-and-true gameplay of the studio's earlier games, which remained relatively the same for several years. We don't get a lot of time with either system but enjoy what little we do get to play.

A bit of sneaking, choking guards, and all-out brawls later, and our time with Lost Judgment's opening comes to a close. But there's still a lot to see.

THE SCENE

There's a lot to see because most of the story in our preview lacks context, and it isn't easy to know exactly what's going on.

One level we play is a high school in Yokohama, which Yagami infiltrates undercover. Our time exploring the school shows a beautifully realized level full of classrooms and courtyards. Our objective is to head to the third floor, but a group of kids connected to the local Chinese gang, the Yokohama Liumang, stop us. A fight ensues. Yagami beating the holy hell out of a group of children is a bit of a weird look, but here we are. Combat within the school, specifically in the classrooms, makes excellent use of the environment; grabbing a student's desk to pummel an enemy is as funny as it is absurd.

Our broader time in Ijincho presents some interesting changes to RGG's games and a better look at some of its themes. For one, Ijincho made its first appearance in Like a Dragon, meaning Lost Judgment is the first brawler featuring the setting. According to Hosokawa, when developing Ijincho, he was already thinking about using it in this new game. The studio made various changes to it to suit the action game, though they're likely undetectable to the player – except for one new and fun addition, which the player can't miss.

"Ijincho is also a vast city, created on the premise of being an RPG, so we also introduced the skateboard as a means of transportation to make navigating the city feel more comfortable," Hosokawa says. This is not Tony Hawk's Pro Skater, but there is a fun novelty to skateboarding around the city, even if its controls are limited.

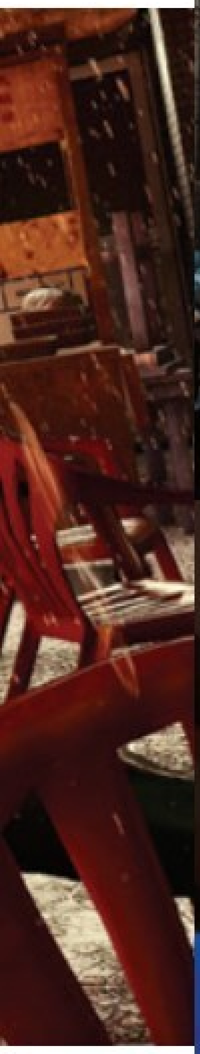
One of the final levels we look at puts Yagami at the crime scene from the beginning of the game. As he investigates the area, two detectives, Kisuke Watanabe and Sakurai, confront him. A tense conversation ensues (Yagami did break into a crime scene). Still, we learn that Kamurocho's police headquarters barred Watanabe from interviewing Ehara about his knowledge of the dead body, referring them to his lawyer and Yagami's coworker, Saori Shirosaki. Since the crime happened in Ijincho, it falls under Watanabe's jurisdiction. Tokyo PD barring him from investigating a key witness is suspicious.

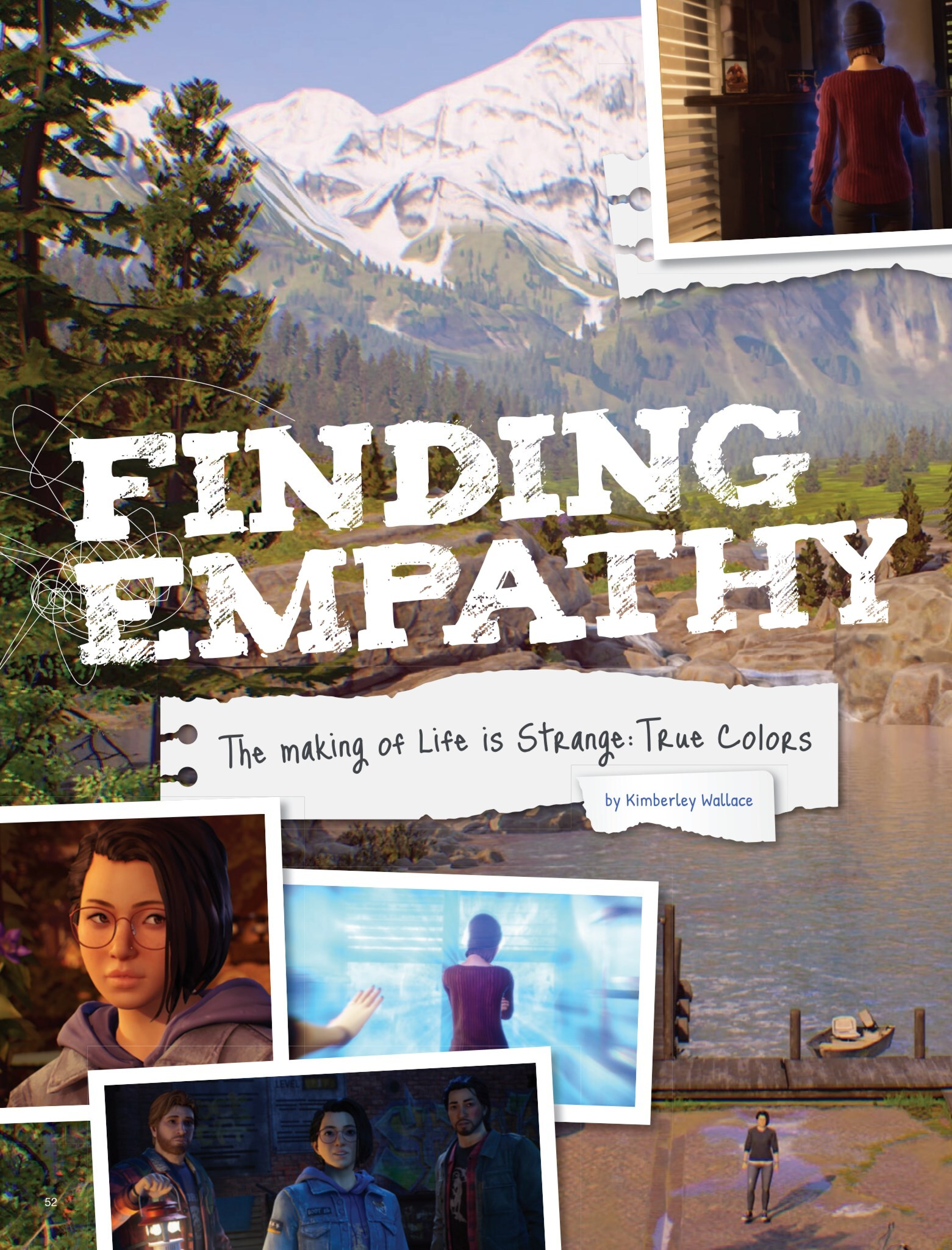
We'll stop short of spoiling the scene, but the level serves as our best look at the game's themes of justice and corruption. RGG's games, especially the most recent releases, have never shied from tackling political and social issues within Japan. And where many Western studios tend to avoid these topics – or at least talking about them – Hosokawa is open about what RGG is trying to say in Lost Judgment and the purpose of video games as political platforms, saying, "Whether or not video games are a good medium for dealing with political issues is not a function of the game itself, but rather a function of the relationship between creators and players."

As he sees it, when video games became a dominating force in entertainment, or as they "became as important as novels and movies as a means for meaningful experiences," it was only natural they would adopt narratives true to the real world. The implication seems that Hosokawa views his audience as a mature one who wants to play games that explore themes about society, not shirk away from the thought of video game creators being politically-minded people.

"It's also probably true that the market has changed from one centered on children and enthusiasts to one that is open and diverse enough to include people with various preferences and ideas," Hosokawa says. "For this reason, I feel that game creators should be strongly encouraged if not required to have a good understanding of and to be cautious about the way they depict certain themes and motifs when considering the diversity of their players."

Our time with Lost Judgment's story is short, but its themes are apparent in the opening minutes and the level with Watanabe. Moreso, its synopsis speaks to a game tackling current and troubling subjects. Whether or not RGG sticks the landing remains to be seen – it has a track record of handling its themes well and not – but it's refreshing to see the studio use the medium to bring awareness to real problems. That counts for something. ◆





FINDING EMPATHY

The making of Life is Strange: True Colors

by Kimberley Wallace

Life is Strange made a name for itself by focusing on relatable characters dealing with complex, real-life issues. The series has tackled mental health, identity, and even racism in its stories. Along the way, relationships between characters, such as Chloe and Max's friendship and Sean and Daniel's sibling bond, have driven each narrative in memorable ways. The games have always centered on our choices and how they shape the people and world around us. As the series goes into its third iteration, it leans into its strength of authentically portraying life's hardships and complicated emotions.

The latest entry, Life is Strange: True Colors, is a new starting point, starring a new character with a different power: Empathy. It's also the first mainline entry not being developed by original development studio Dontnod; instead, it is being created by Deck Nine, the team responsible for the outstanding Before the Storm prequel. Here's a behind-the-scenes look at how Alex Chen's journey came to life and why empathy was always a driving force in its creation.

» PLATFORM
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
PC • Stadia

» STYLE
1-Player Adventure

» PUBLISHER
Square Enix

» DEVELOPER
Deck Nine

» RELEASE
September 10

HOW BEFORE THE STORM INFORMED TRUE COLORS

Deck Nine is intimately familiar with the Life is Strange world and what makes it unique. The team loved bringing to life Chloe and Rachel's sweet-but-somber story in Life is Strange: Before the Storm and surprised fans and critics alike in how they gave the character of Chloe more layers and allowed players to understand her plight better. One thing that stood out in the team's mind was the power of empathy in telling Chloe's story. It stayed with Deck Nine until Square Enix approached the studio to develop the franchise's third main entry.

"It was very much a period of discovery, where there was no rush to find the right thing," says narrative director Jon Zimmerman. "We had the time and the freedom to explore all different ideas. And it was actually pretty soon that we came to this notion of empathy; that was the germ that led to everything else …"

"I know that we wanted to embrace the fact that a narrative adventure game is a literal experience of empathy," adds senior staff writer Felice Kuan. "We loved that aspect of it, and that was there from the start."

Both Zimmerman and Kuan were new to writing for video games when they worked on Before the Storm. It let them come in with a fresh perspective, and they quickly realized video games had a big advantage when telling stories. "We would talk a lot about big picture things around narrative adventures, and we often came back to this thing of how absolutely unique and spectacular it is to place a player in the perspective of a character that you want to create a dramatic journey for, and how that differentiates games from every other medium," Zimmerman says.

Deck Nine quickly became immersed in the fan community for Before the Storm. One of the team's favorite pieces of feedback was that players who previously didn't love Chloe changed their tune after playing as her in Before the Storm. "A common thread was that someone would say, 'Hey, I found Chloe a little bit much in the first game, but then after I was in her shoes, I would die for her,'" Kuan says. This revelation helped solidify that something special happens when players embody a character and experience their point of view.

From here, Deck Nine started focusing on creating True Colors' protagonist: Alex Chen, the first Asian American lead in the series. A big goal was to maintain the complexity of the characters we've seen throughout the series and provide somebody completely different from before.

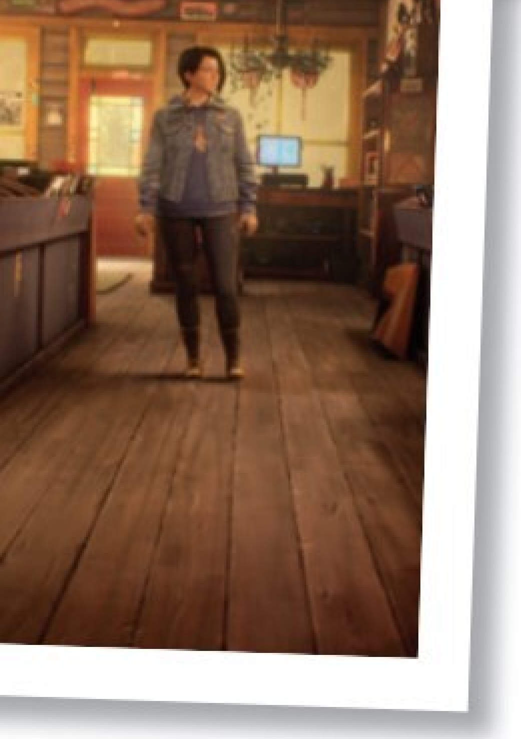
Welcome To Haven Springs

Deck Nine is located in Colorado, where the game is set, so the team had plenty of inspiration and motivation when creating Haven Springs. "I think a lot of people are finding Colorado and saying, 'Oh my god, this is an amazing place,'" says producer Rebeccah Bassell. "[It's] the tiny small mountain towns, how active everybody is outdoors, all of the unique quirks that these tiny communities have, the wildlife that you get to see … The biodiversity of everything across Colorado is spectacular."

Bassell says much of the inspiration for Haven Springs was found in the tiny mountain towns in the Rocky Mountains, adding that the environmental team looked at Colorado towns like Georgetown, Nederland, Gunnison, and Telluride. Modeling Haven Springs after these towns also worked well to convey some of the game's themes.

"The box canyon is a term I learned while making the game," says narrative director Jon Zimmerman. "And that's the topography where you're kind of in a valley surrounded by these massively tall mountains in all directions, and that became so crucial narratively. Because when you're looking out and you're seeing these mountainous walls that are framing this little gem of a town, it raises one of the central questions that we're pursuing about what home is. Are these walls of a fortress that are protecting you from the outside world, or are these walls of a cell that are keeping you contained and not letting you be the fullest expression of who you can be?"

Your decisions will shape the community of Haven Springs and the relationships Alex forms there



BRINGING ALEX TO LIFE

True Colors is a story with many layers, and Alex's journey cannot be summed up in one sentence. We meet Alex when she's just leaving a group home after eight years. She's heading to live with her brother in a town called Haven Springs [see sidebar]. She gets along with her brother, but they haven't connected in some time. "Her background is intentionally a source of mystery," Zimmerman says. "She comes from a broken family, and she was separated from her brother at a young age. She doesn't have anyone in the world looking out for her by the time she comes to Haven Springs. We'll see in her reuniting with her brother how that brings up the specter of their past and how Alex shies away from wanting to engage with it."

Instead of her introduction to Haven Springs being a joyful one, tragedy soon strikes when Alex's brother dies in a mysterious accident. Alex is not only on a quest to find out what truly happened, but she's also searching for her own place in the world, a community of her own. "[We knew] that Alex was going to be someone for whom that was singularly meaningful to her, because of her background in foster care and never having a real home," Zimmerman says.

Alex is 21 years old, making her more mature than previous Life is Strange protagonists and giving her more adult situations to confront. She's at an interesting point in her life, where she's trying to figure out who she wants to be and what she wants to do. Her life in the group home may not have been great, but it was comfortable. Alex is now leaving all of that, but she sees the limitless possibilities in everything.

Erika Mori, who not only lent her voice to Alex but also performed motion capture for the role, describes Alex's personality and outlook best: "Alex has an almost insatiable curiosity to discover what makes people tick, understanding the 'why' behind words or behavior. However, she has lived with the power [or the curse of the power] of empathy her entire life, and its volatility has made life difficult – making her watchful, cautious, and an outsider by circumstance. But she always carries with her this thread of hope that makes her a character of resilience and (ultimately) joy."

Alex is in touch with her emotions since her power is empathy. This led to the decision to make her an artist – a musician, to be specific. "At a certain point, we realized that we were talking about an artist, because [we needed] someone who has that kind of a filter on the world – a sensitivity and vulnerability that they can't turn off," Zimmerman says.

Understanding and sharing another person's feelings is a skill that seems in short supply these days, but Alex has always seen it as more of a curse than a blessing due to its emotional toll. However, if she wants to find answers about her brother's death, she needs to tap into this ability to see what people are hiding. Discovering how to represent her power wasn't easy, but it proved an essential part of who Alex is and who she becomes.

All episodes of True Colors will be available at launch, but the game still keeps the five-chapter format and intense cliffhangers

The Thought Behind Alex's Love Interests

Love is in the air for Alex in Haven Springs, if you want it. Alex has two main potential love interests, but it's cool if you just want to be friends with both of them. For those who do take the leap, you'll choose between Steph and Ryan. Fans may remember Steph from Before the Storm; she's fiercely independent, sassy, and always on the move. Ryan, on the other hand, is a quintessential outdoorsman but dork at heart. He has spent his life embedded in the DNA of Haven Springs, as his father owns an establishment in town.

"[Steph and Ryan] are great foils to one another and what Alex wants to do next in her life," says producer Rebeccah Bassell. "So when Alex is establishing these relationships, the two of them have their perspectives on being a part of the town or seeking adventure somewhere else. It's fun to have them be a little trio of friends together because they definitely push and pull what the other wants to establish that."

MAKING EMPATHY MATTER

Until this point, Life is Strange characters have possessed supernatural powers, like Max's ability to rewind time and Daniel's telekinesis. Alex's power is based much more in reality, as she can feel the emotions of others, but it comes with a twist as she can also manipulate and absorb these emotions. While Deck Nine was initially intrigued by the concept of empathy, it didn't prove easy to discover the best way to portray this ability and make it still feel authentic.

As opposed to other Life is Strange protagonists, the writers wanted Alex to have access to her power at the start of the game; she's been living with this ability, and she's already formed her own relationship with it. "What was very compelling to us was [her] power starting in foster care, in the brokenness of her family, you could very well imagine that would make an already bad situation worse," Kuan says. "Therefore, that gives Alex a lot of complexity within herself, an ambivalence about this power … Because we didn't want to look at empathy just as a gameplay mechanic but as a thing that can be both a wonderful tool and a source of harm or a source of self-doubt. Having her in that spot, both supernaturally and just from the mundane emotional level, was very interesting to us."

Zimmerman recalls it taking time to figure out how to best represent Alex's power in the gameplay but says finding the solution is one of his highlights working on the game. Alex's power of empathy started very simply, with the team using different colored auras to represent specific emotions in others. However, things got exciting when the developers came up with the idea to add "novas." Novas create a supernatural flare that transforms the world before you, offering a reflection of another person's psyche. In this highly charged emotional state, Alex sees fragments of thoughts and memories to help her get to the root of the issue.

"I think [novas are] when everything really clicked into place from a story and design marriage standpoint, because we had the freedom to get kind of surreal and abstract in evoking, 'What does fear feel like?'" Zimmerman explains. The team went beyond just thinking about the emotion itself into how the feeling would be represented in a specific character. Zimmerman uses the example of fear looking very different for a child than it does for an older person, saying the novas allowed the team to dive into all the various nuances of empathy.

When it came to Alex's power, Mori had to think carefully and experiment for her performance. "It was a really interesting puzzle to figure out how to perform a specific emotion that was going through several different filters before arriving in the world," she explains. "For example, when another person's rage would overtake Alex, she would intimately know how that rage was feeling for them, but it would also trigger her own feelings and [memories] of her own rage. Ultimately, Alex was trying to contain the emotional resonance of two people – the other and herself. It was fun to play with the different ways to show this with my face, body, and voice."

Of course, understanding characters on a deeper level is bound to impact a choice-heavy game. That's not lost on Deck Nine, as the creative team constantly asked itself what kinds of dilemmas and challenges would occur through the empathic experience. "An obvious one is if you can empathize with a person who is doing something immoral, does that change the way that you feel about the action that they're taking?" Zimmerman says. "I think that there's a whole family of questions, not that those are the only things that come up as choices, but things that we felt were exciting territory to explore."

It's an interesting choice to put in the player's hands, as they can decide whether to have Alex experience, absorb, or even manipulate the powerful emotions in those around her. For instance, do you let someone feel the painful emotions, or do you take these feelings away from them? And what toll does that take on Alex? "What the game ultimately says is that it is a balance of understanding where your personal boundaries are," says producer Rebeccah Bassell. "The player can decide that for Alex, and at the same time, [decide if they should] honor the feelings of those around her, because it is a very precious thing to take away someone's agency. You may think it will help them, but it may not. And that's the choice that they have to navigate."

Navigating emotions is already complicated, but Deck Nine takes it to a new and intriguing level by making players consider the different facets of empathy and its positive and negative parts. Since empathy is the driving force behind the game, it makes sense to challenge the player with its complexities. Here's hoping it makes the choices hit a little differently, allowing True Colors to have its own unique identity within the series. ◆

Family Bonding

The only way to truly feel like a family is to create embarrassing memories, right? Alex's voice actress Erika Mori never had an older brother but got a taste of it thanks to Han Soto, who voices Alex's sibling Gabe in the game. "Han stepped seamlessly into that role [in real life] by constantly scaring the pants off of me on set all the time with his pranks," Mori recalls. "The director and [assistant director] literally told him that he was allowed one scare per shoot because otherwise, the only thing that we'd be capturing would be me screaming in fear and laughing at him being the worst in true older brother fashion. Still, to this day, he'll randomly send me a screenshot of my scared face from a shoot. I think I have enough of those photos to fill out a dating profile."

Erika Mori had to mocap some of Alex's most emotional scenes from her apartment due to COVID-19

Pokémon Legends: Arceus

Catching imaginations

» Platform
Switch

» Style
1-Player Role-Playing
(Online TBA)

» Publisher
Nintendo

» Developer
Game Freak

» Release
January 28

Ever since fans heard Pokémon developer Game Freak was leaping to develop mainline games for the Nintendo Switch, they have been clamoring for the studio to make more considerable changes to the franchise's standard formula. Following Let's Go Pikachu & Eevee and Sword & Shield, the introduction of Pokémon Legends: Arceus, with its feudal setting and less structured exploration, appears to be the big departure fans have been awaiting. We emerged from August's Pokémon Presents livestream with even more details on this new take on the franchise, as well as even more optimism about the series' bold new direction.

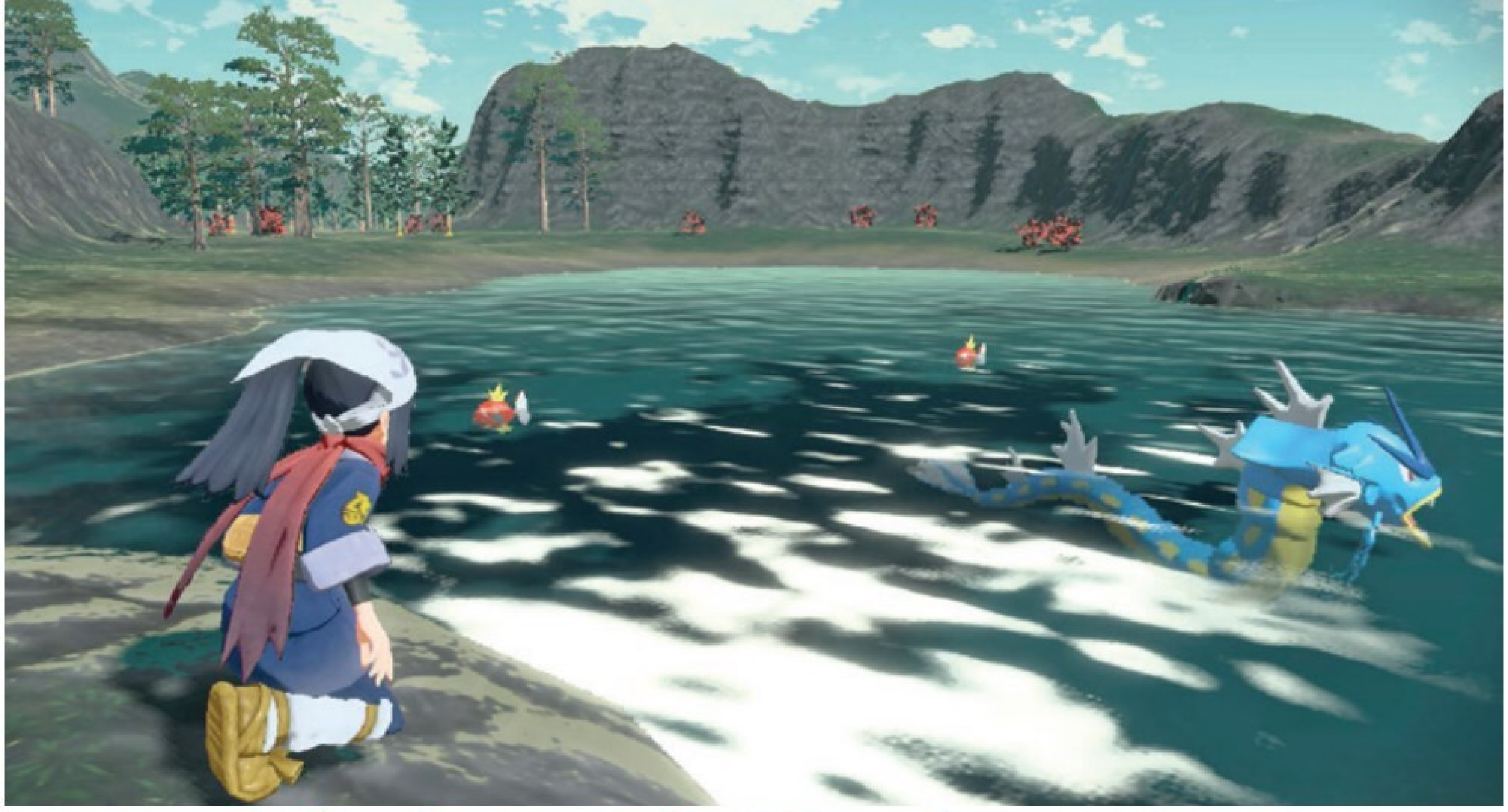
Pokémon Legends: Arceus combines the traditional turn-based combat with various action-RPG elements. Sure, you can enter a battle with wild Pokémon in hopes of weakening them before you toss a Poké Ball their way, but if you observe them from a distance, aim accurately, and stealthily throw at them, it's possible to circumvent that process. However, some wild Pokémon are too strong or stubborn to catch without first weakening them, so in those cases, battling them first is necessary.

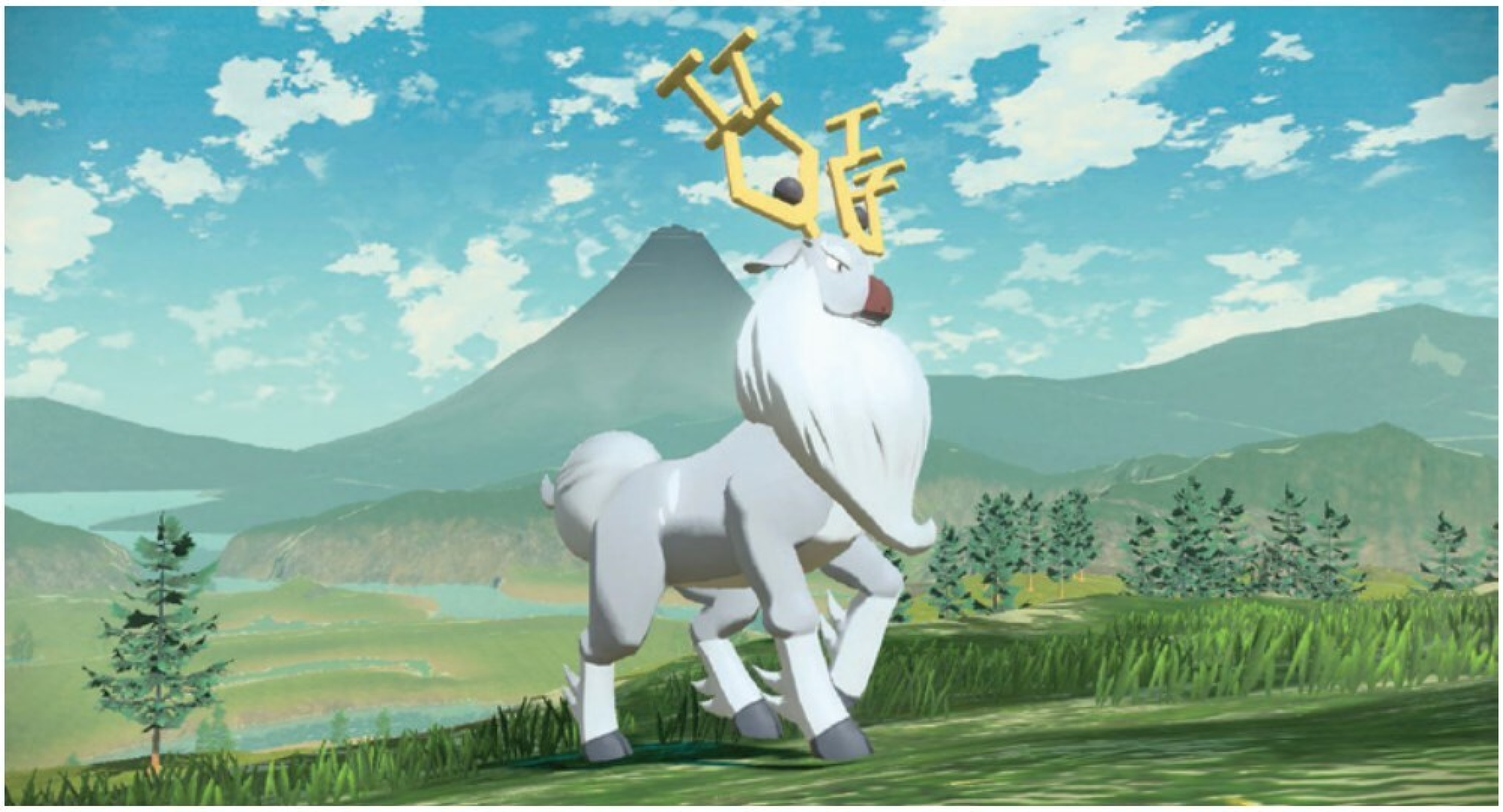
We already knew that Legends: Arceus takes place in a past version of Sinnoh, the region featured in Pokémon Diamond & Pearl. In fact, we're so far in the past that it isn't even called Sinnoh at this point; instead, it's called Hisui. The bustling towns are fewer and farther between in Hisui, leaving plenty of room to explore.

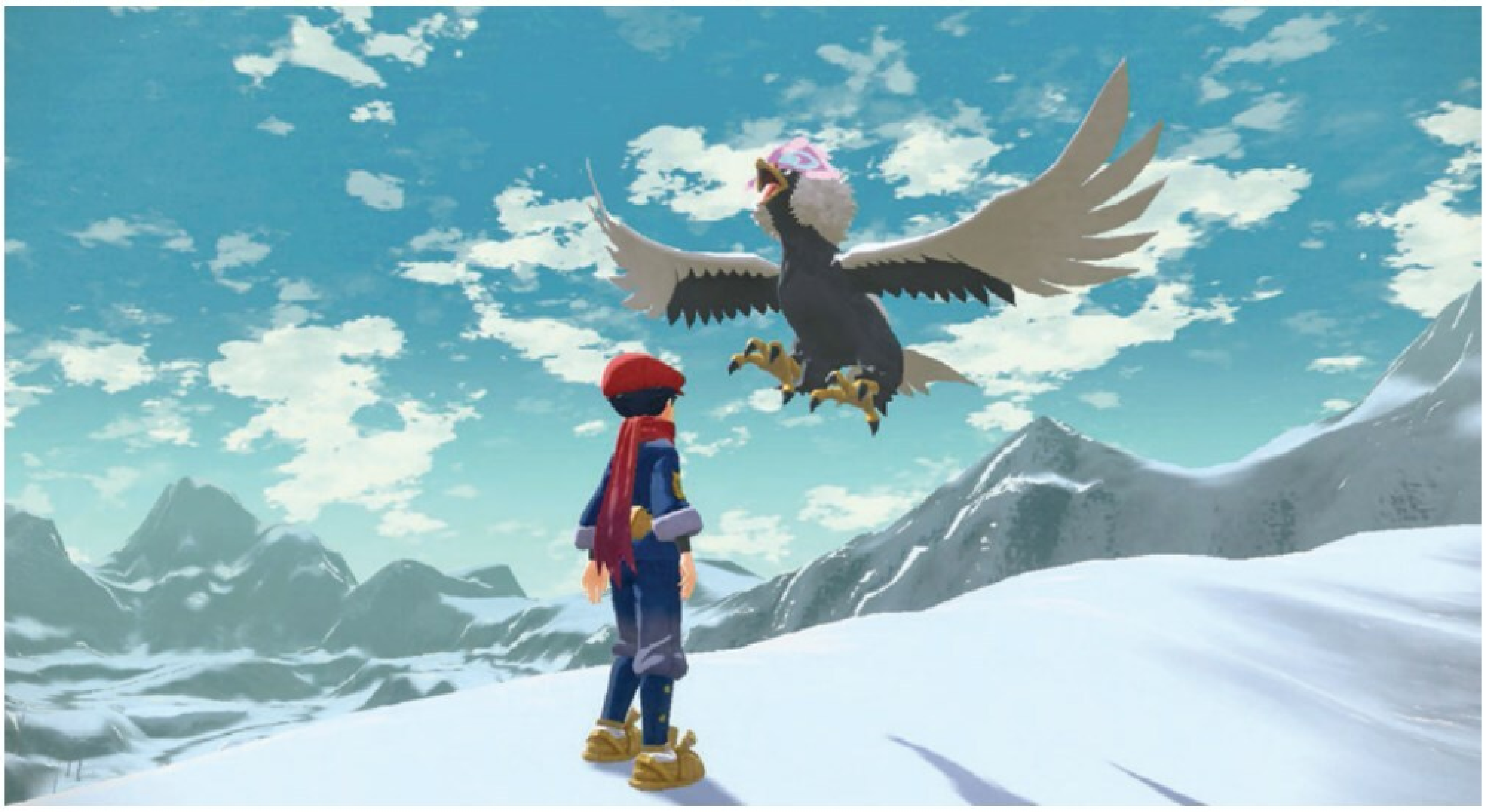
Players control a member of the Galaxy Expedition Team, a group of explorers who have assignments to visit and document parts of the Region. With Mount Coronet serving as its center, Hisui is rich in diverse biomes. Featuring lush meadows, snow-capped hills, and idyllic lakes, the region is home to beautiful vistas housing a wide range of Pokémon.

Your journey starts in Jubilife Village, a busy settlement serving as your base of operations. After leaving the village, you can visit a base camp within the outpost network of the Galaxy Expedition Team. There, you can let your Pokémon recover or use the workbench to craft items like Poké Balls. You can also pay visits to the trading post to exchange Pokémon you catch with other players. Once you finish the survey of your assignment, you return to Jubilife to report back and prepare for your next task.

As you progress through the Hisui region, you encounter familiar Pokémon like Gyarados, Wurmple, and Bidoof. You also choose one of three partner Pokémon from the other regions: Rowlet, Cyndaquil, or Oshawott. However, the Hisui region, despite being the Sinnoh region of the past, houses Pokémon







and forms players have never seen before. Wyrdeer, a Normal/Psychic-type that emits energy orbs from its antlers, and Basculegion, a Water/Ghost-type that battles alongside the souls of its dead Basculin friends, are majestic and imposing. Meanwhile, Braviary and Growlithe steal the show with beautiful new Hisuian forms. Growlithe's new form, in particular, is especially striking thanks to its out-of-control fluffiness.

The highlight of the new footage showed how players could traverse the Hisui region. While you can certainly explore the region on foot, why not put your new Poké partners to good use? We witnessed the character soaring through the skies on a Hisuian Braviary, cruising by a waterfall on a Basculegion, and riding over hills on the back of Wyrdeer. You could always use Pokémon in traversal, dating back to the HMs of the original games, but Legends: Arecus seems to empower the player with more freedom than ever before.

While the new footage of Pokémon Legends: Arceus answered a lot of questions, it raised nearly as many. Are trainer battles a thing of the past? How many Pokémon are in the Hisui region? What happened to the cool Hisuian Pokémon that don't appear in the Sinnoh games? Can we ride Pokémon other than the three shown in the footage? Most importantly, does being a part of the Galaxy Expedition Team hint that we are founding members of Team Galactic, the insidious organization of the Sinnoh region in Diamond & Pearl? We'll have to wait until January to learn for sure, but our level of intrigue is at an all-time high.

Pokémon Legends: Arceus continues to look like a promising step in the right direction for the franchise as it grows into its new console home. With gorgeous environments, an intriguing story, and a ton of Pokémon to interact with, we're hopeful that Legends: Arceus is the series reinvention players have wanted for years.
» **Brian Shea**

Far Cry 6

Stoking the flames

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
Stadia • PC

» Style
1-Player Action
(2-Player Online)

» Publisher
Ubisoft

» Developer
Ubisoft Toronto

» Release
October 7

Ever since its announcement last summer, Far Cry 6 has been one of the most highly anticipated games on the horizon. With a revolution against a murderous dictator on the fictional Caribbean Island of Yara serving as the backdrop, the stakes are high in this latest entry. While everything has looked promising to this point, I was excited to finally get my hands on the new game to see for myself how it's turning out.

The opening moments of Far Cry 6 feature celebratory tones, but they don't last long. You play Dani Rojas (who can be male or female), a former soldier looking towards a better life. You're on the roof of your home having a drink with your friends Alejo and Lita, excited to leave Yara behind. The plan is drinks in Mexico, then dinner in Miami. A commotion on the ground draws your attention as soldiers in President Antón Castillo's army start shooting civilians. Lita pleads with Alejo not to draw attention, but his hatred for Castillo is too much; he throws his beer at the soldiers, yelling, "F--- Castillo!" Unfortunately, the soldiers spot him and put a bullet in his head.

All hell breaks loose as Lita and Dani make a break for it, evading soldiers and racing to the docks. They board a fishing vessel, but the sense of relief is short-lived as the boat suddenly stops and Castillo walks down the steps. Actor Giancarlo Esposito of *Breaking Bad* and *The Mandalorian* fame plays Castillo. From this scene, he appears to one-up the already sterling roster of menacing antagonists from Far Cry's history.

After his bodyguard murders one of the refugees who yells in Castillo's face, the President turns his attention to a small, hooded child in the back, who turns out to be his son, Diego. Diego was also attempting to escape, and he pleads with his father to let the others go. Castillo doesn't listen. He whisks his son away, and his forces open fire on the ship.

Dani awakens on Isla Santuario next to Lita, who is bleeding out on the beach. She hangs on long enough to pass Dani her phone with information on finding rebels on the island. In an emotional moment, Lita dies, and Dani grabs her machete and embarks on the journey to escape from Yara.

Dani soon seeks out the camp in Lita's phone and finds Clara, the leader of the resistance group Libertad. Dani asks for help getting out, but Clara runs down Libertad's mission, convincing Dani to stay and fight. Dani's first mission is to track down a former double agent named Juan Cortez.

Juan is known for his love of booze but also his resourcefulness and eccentricity. Naturally, I find him at the bar in a small, beachside town. Castillo's FND military forces are also looking for him, and it turns out the barman sold him out. After Juan pays the bartender back for that favor, he and his pet alligator, Guapo, jump into action, fighting off the soldiers alongside Dani. Guapo likes Dani and becomes the first Amigo – animal companions that fight alongside you – that you add to your roster.

Before heading back to camp, Juan says he wants to make a stop at a

recent FND supply drop. Along with Guapo, I take out the soldiers and scavenge the supplies. Once back at camp, I use those supplies to craft two special bullet types for enemies with and without armor, respectively.

Juan then tells me my next mission: Steal uranium from one of Castillo's forts. On my way there, I encounter a checkpoint that blocks traffic with a spike strip. I decide to take out the soldiers and destroy the FND billboard to claim the checkpoint as my own, which posts guerrilla fighters there instead of Castillo's forces. Shortly after, I arrive at my destination.

The fort is full of guards, but I notice multiple ways to approach the situation after scoping it out from a nearby viewpoint. Do I equip my armor-piercing rounds and go in guns blazing? Or do I take a sneakier route to make my approach easier? I see vines on the exterior that I could climb, and there is a way to swim under the fort and enter through the cellar. I could also go to the substation on the cliffside and zipline into the window. I decide to scale the vines and take out the patrolling soldiers one by one. After killing the officer, retrieving the key, and finding the uranium, I head back to Juan at Clara's camp.

Once back, Juan hands me my first Supremo – an ultimate weapon that operates on a cooldown. The Exterminador is a multi-rocket launcher that locks onto enemies and wipes them from existence; it's the definition of "overkill" against foot soldiers but is also effective against tanks. Other Supremos you unlock include the Volta, an EMP pulse that knocks enemies over, disables security systems, and hijacks vehicles, and the Médico, which lets you self-revive and heal allies. My personal favorite is El Muro, a revolver with a ton of stopping power that you use with a handheld shield.

After blowing up two of Castillo's ships and escaping Isla Santuario, I land on El Este, where I meet a whole new cast of characters, fight alongside different resistance groups, and open a ton of new missions. Yara seems vast in its explorable area, and I can't wait to dig into the final product.

Far Cry 6 starts with a bang from both narrative and action standpoints. I'm curious if Ubisoft can carry forward with these emotional gut-punches without falling victim to the cognitive dissonance for which Far Cry is often known. Hopefully, the enjoyment we get from flying around in our wingsuits, firing over-the-top weapons, and fighting alongside a cute wiener dog named Chorizo doesn't contrast too harshly with the story of an island in political peril. Only time will tell if Ubisoft can balance these disparate tones, but in my time playing, I had a blast and still felt the weight of the dark narrative beats. » **Brian Shea**

NBA 2K22

A rebound season

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1 to 4-Player Sports
(10-Player Online)

» Publisher
2K Sports

» Developer
Visual Concepts

» Release
September 10

Last year, Visual Concepts' NBA 2K series had a season of highs and lows, as it made the move to new-gen hardware and tried to keep last-gen users happy. For NBA 2K22, the mission hasn't changed; a new-gen and current-gen version are both in development with new features to keep players on both hardware iterations invested. With the release date just around the corner, here's one last look at what you can expect on the court this year.

Visual Concepts is promising more impactful changes on both sides of the game, although the details are still light on what this entails. Offensively, the goal is to give players more control over how they score. Basketball IQ and stick skills play a more significant role in your success. You can expect precision jump shooting, dunking in traffic, and pulling off alley-oops to be more skill-based alongside new signature moves and combos to break down defenders off the dribble. "If you don't make the right play, then that's going to be on you," says gameplay director Mike Wang.

Defensively, a revamped shot contest, stealing, and blocking system bring more realism to NBA 2K22. Elite defenders able to play suffocating defense on the perimeter should make much more of an impact. "All the things you do in the game, they're a lot more skill-based," Wang says. "What you come away with is an experience that just feels a lot more rewarding."

After having much success last year, Seasons are back, and they are going game-wide. Visual Concepts says to expect more content, rewards, and more ways to play. "It's free for all NBA 2K22 gamers; there's no pay, no battle pass; this is all free content," confirms executive producer Erick Boenisch. "It's going to be playable in MyTeam on both gens; it's going to be playable on MyCareer mode on both gens. And also on The W on the next-gen consoles. This brings more constant rewards, more ways to play for gamers all year long."

The Neighborhood has become an integral part of the NBA 2K experience, functioning as a one-stop-shop social hub where players can purchase new gear and compete against other players in pickup games and tournaments. Last year this feature got an upgrade, with new-gen players introduced to The City and current-gen players getting The 2K Beach. The City is getting a complete makeover and some much-needed improvements, while current-gen players get to take to the waters and compete aboard a cruise ship. The cruise ship will dock at exotic destinations throughout each season, with special shoreside events to keep things interesting.

A traditional career mode will hit current-gen versions, but Visual Concepts is merging MyCareer with The City for new-gen. As your player makes a name for themselves, they can pursue side ventures here, such as entering the fashion world or getting involved in the hip-hop business. You will also watch your home base grow with your ambition and success right in The City.

"What we're doing this year is [we] really tore down the wall between The City and MyCareer; they're one," Boenisch explains. "Your MyCareer takes place in The City. You'll be using the [new] questing engine we made as part of the MyCareer experience." When asked if we would get an authored, cinematic story like the past, Boenisch had this to say: "Without giving too much away because I do want to talk about this a lot later, you will have these interactions, these cinematics, if you want to call it that, in real-time in The City. As you are going about your story, you're going to visit your agent's house; you're going to the Nike facility to have your negotiations in the environment there. You're moving about your career in The City alongside many, many other players doing the same."

Other additions include the return of drafting for MyTeam, and MyNBA/WNBA having a sharper focus on the staff behind the players, meaning scouting, training, and coaching are much more impactful on your team's success. Time will tell if all these changes prove successful, but we're hoping Visual Concepts comes back stronger and in better shape for this new season. » **Kimberley Wallace**

Tom Clancy's XDefiant

Technicolor chaos

During an unexpected reveal stream, executive producer Mark Rubin and creative director Jason Schroeder described Tom Clancy's XDefiant as "fast-paced firefights meets punk rock mosh pits." And based on the extensive footage Ubisoft showcased, this wacky mixture is spot on. XDefiant tests players' skills and awareness in 6v6, close-quarter arenas, from fighting in abandoned, underground train stations to gated community parks. Here, the outcome of battles depends on weapon accuracy, team communication, and ability usage. Modes like Domination and Escort harken back to other competitive/cooperative shooter franchises in the extensive Tom Clancy's universe. Sure, XDefiant might be a free-to-play "Ubisoft Original," but it wears various inspirations on its sleeve.

The lore of Splinter Cell, Ghost Recon, and The Division plays a large part in XDefiant's core mechanics. The major factions you choose from are maverick groups from these franchises. The Wolves, Outcasts, Cleaners, and Echelon come with their own traits, abilities, and ultra (ultimate). Think of these personalized roles as the classes you might see in most traditional FPS games. However, specific skills, like healing gas or invisibility cloaks, bring tremendous value to your team in duels. Your avatar, or Defiant, is fully customizable. This not only applies to cosmetics; you can swap out different aspects of your loadout, too. No firearm is locked behind any faction, meaning you can hop into a match with your favorite gear at any time. You'll be armed with a primary, secondary, and a device you can swap out while on the respawn menus.

The sheer grittiness of Ubisoft's worlds is appropriately returning, but this time it's juxtaposed with vivid, graffiti-laden backdrops – this is the "mosh pit" quality the developers excitedly mentioned. Ultimately, the game's press release says it best: "XDefiant will immerse players at the forefront of the Tom Clancy universe at iconic locations in the throes of technicolor chaos, with maps mixing indoor and outdoor environments, ensuring smooth gameplay and unpredictable engagements." Consequently, the overall game feel is at the forefront of what makes XDefiant a potential success – each firearm and the myriad attachments available in-game will fit any playstyle. This tight gunplay mixed with sliding physics might appeal to diehard Warzone and Apex Legends fans. Like those two games, XDefiant is a multiplayer-only title, so future content rollouts will likely keep leaderboard grinders coming back for more. » **Jason Guisao**

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
Stadia • PC

» Style
12-Player
Online Shooter

» Publisher
Ubisoft

» Developer
Ubisoft San Francisco

» Release
2022

Weird West

Be the cowboy you want to be

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Shooter

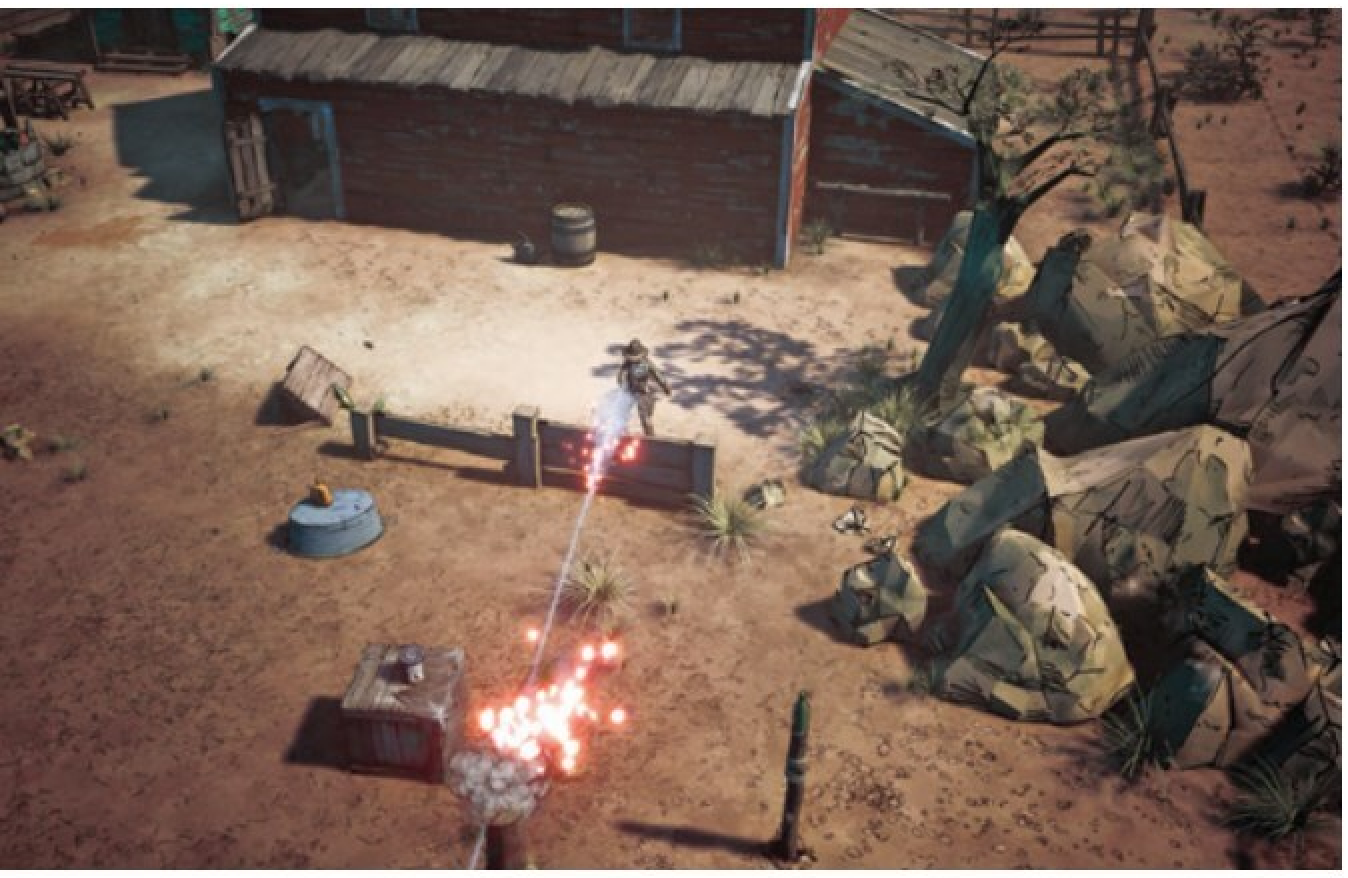
» Publisher
Devolver Digital

» Developer
Wolfeye Studios

» Release
Fall

Even though it's the studio's first game, it makes sense that Wolfeye Studios is developing Weird West, an immersive sim set, as the name implies, in the West, full of bandits and gunslingers. That's because 15 of Wolfeye's 25-person development team are formerly of Arkane Studios, famous for making the Dishonored series, Prey, and other immersive sims built around player freedom and mechanical choice. With that kind of history, Weird West fits neatly alongside the group's previous work. And if you're a fan of those earlier projects, our time with Weird West makes us think it might be a game to keep on your radar.

During a recent preview, we saw a little over 30 minutes of new gameplay. Our demo begins with one of the five available storylines – the bounty hunter. Our nameless heroine wakes up to the murder of her son outside her house. We don't precisely learn why, but we do know that at one time, we were one of the most feared bounty hunters in the West before leaving that world for a normal life. It might be safe to assume our past has come back for us.



As Wolfeye president (and Arkane founder) Raphael Colanotino tells it, each of the five storylines works in tandem with each other; once you finish one character's journey, the next picks up in the same timeline. The world remains the same, and your previous character becomes an NPC in the new character's story.

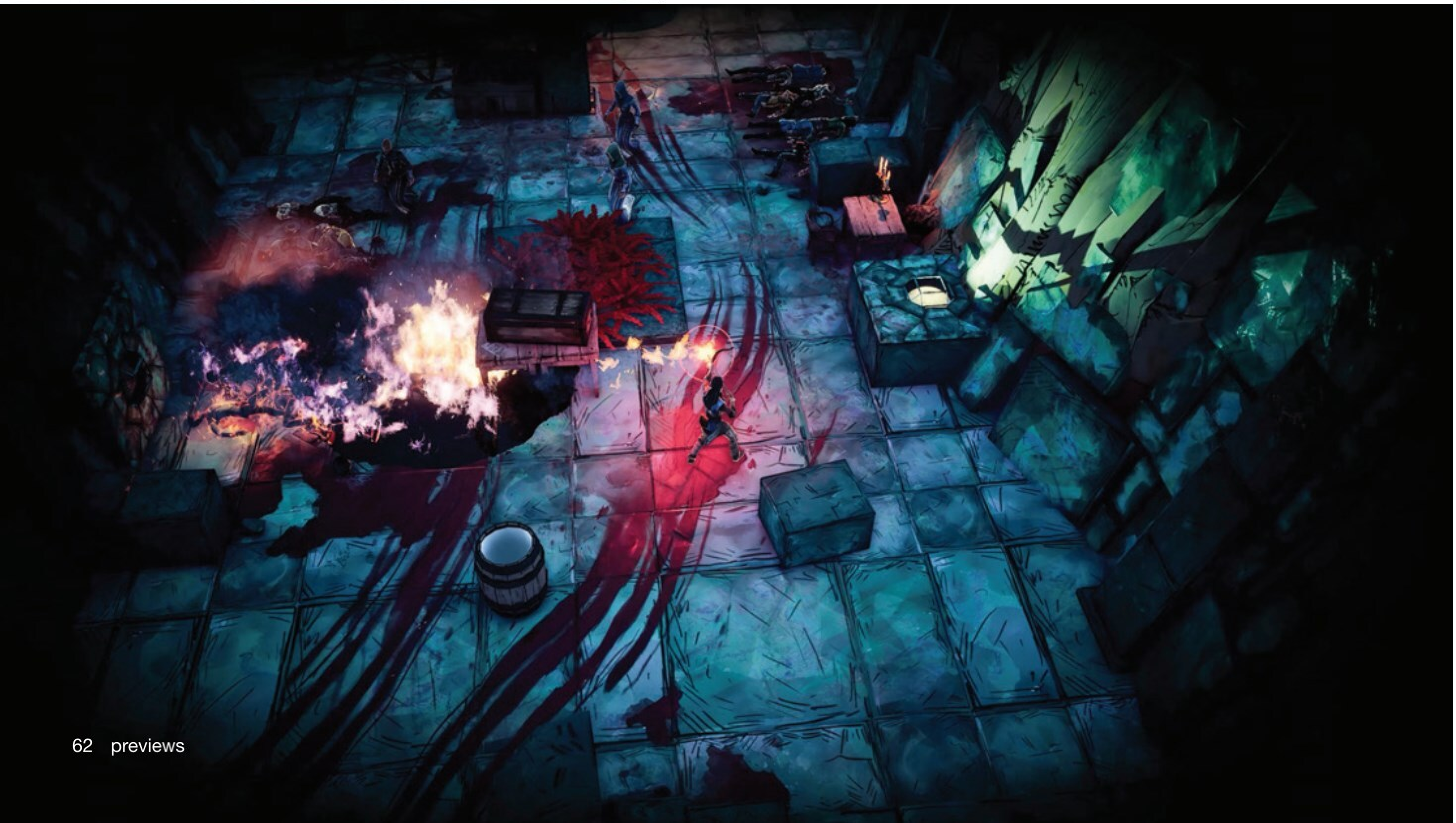
Played with an isometric camera, Weird West's character runs around the world, picking objects up and throwing things around. Weird West reacts in unique ways when the player decides to push its boundaries and experiment, something that should be familiar for anyone who's played Dishonored before. This goes for the game's story as well; players are encouraged to bend the narrative to their will. Be violent, compassionate, cunning, and so on. Play as you see fit.

These systems all come to a head in the showpiece of our demo – a main story mission where we're trying to pick up the trail of the group that killed our family. Our first time through is a bloodbath. Lanterns full of oil make the perfect target for our bullets, dousing the environment and our enemies in fire. The inclusion of a Max Payne-like bullet-time mode also helps us get through the carnage by slowing down time and allowing us to dodge through the air while returning fire. Until we die, that is, and it's time to try a new approach.

Our second time through, we go silent, quietly picking off enemies and hiding their bodies. This approach goes much smoother than the previous one, and we're able to sneak past the horde, stealing the key and rope we need and lowering ourselves into their well, which has a makeshift bunker hidden beneath it. However, things don't go as smoothly around these parts, and it's back to gunfights, though luckily, there are fewer enemies down here. At the end of the fight, we learn we've started a vendetta. One of our victims was a gang leader, and this is sure to have in-game repercussions down the line. For now, however, our demo is over.

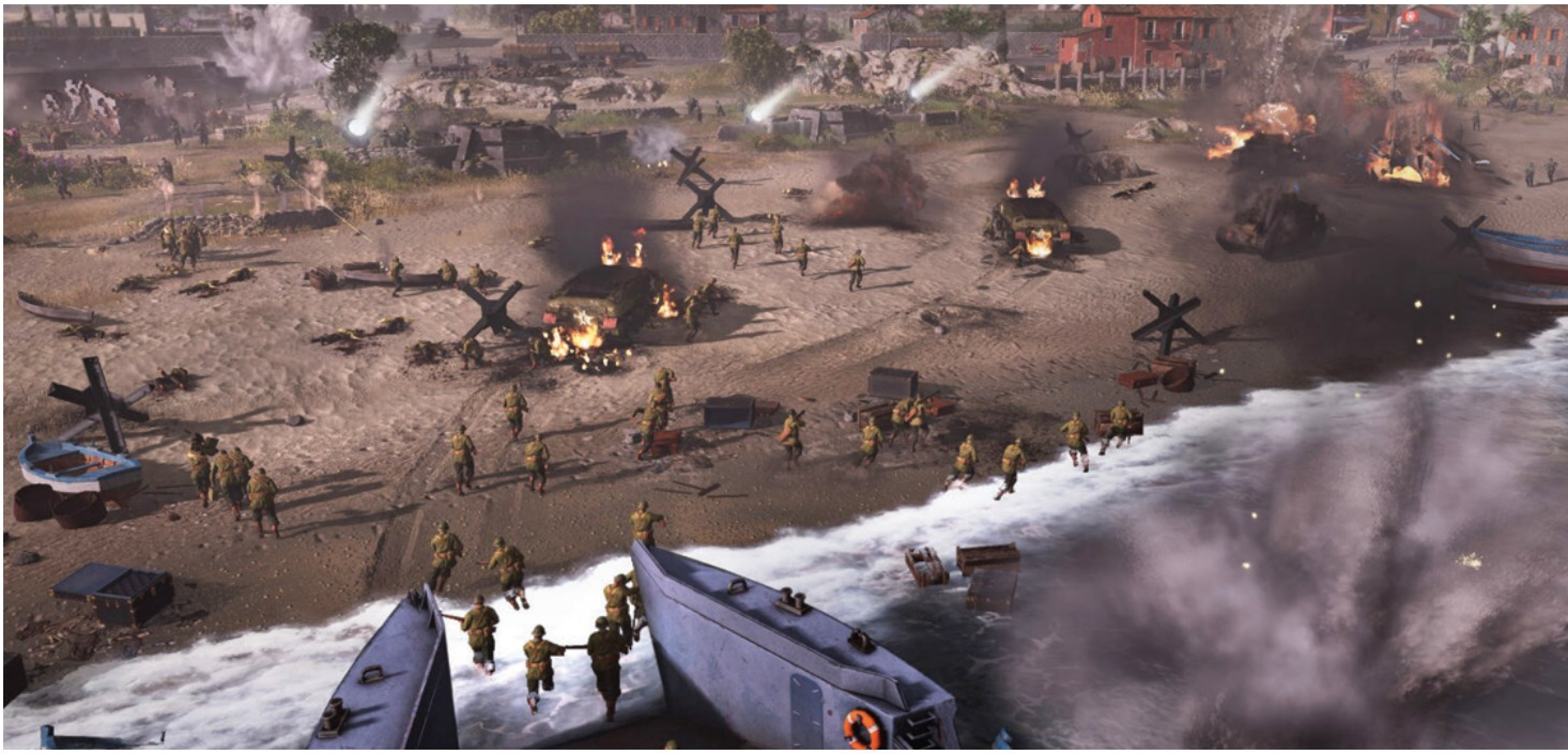
During our time with Weird West, it was hard to get a sense of the story or much else beyond the general reactiveness of the world, which isn't a knock. It's an immersive sim. The way the world reacts to your actions is front-and-center. In that respect, Weird West has us interested. Wolfeye may be a new studio, but its development team has a proven track record with this kind of game, and we're looking forward to seeing more when it's released this fall.

» **Blake Hester**



Company Of Heroes 3

Reinvigorating real-time strategy



Once upon a time, the real-time strategy genre flourished, with many titles vying for the crown at any given time. With the emergence of MOBAs and titles like Heroes of Newerth, League of Legends, and Dota 2, the once king of PC genres took a quiet backseat to its new progeny. While RTS titles continue to exist, they're no longer at the forefront. Relic Entertainment is hoping to change that with one of the most prominent franchises of yesteryear, where micromanaging the perfect group of infantry with scrappy explosives and perfect placement near a ruined building could mean the difference between victory and defeat. Company of Heroes is coming back.

A significant shift here is single-player content. Generally, RTS titles are multiplayer-centric and don't offer much for solo players after the campaign concludes. Relic is seeking to create a dynamic campaign that's different each time you play it, coming down to big macro decisions on a war map that let you make interesting choices in terms of resources, units, and strategy. Choosing different ways to tackle things each time should create a more engaging experience.

While a varied campaign playthrough should help keep things fresh, Relic also attempts to court newcomers to the genre by adding a pause function to single-player. Pausing won't be available in multiplayer, but players can pause and queue up orders, commands, and abilities to fire off. The pause-and-queue can take a ton of pressure off situations where you might be trying to build up a base, fight on several fronts simultaneously, and execute careful maneuvers with critical timing without the stress and furtive clicking. Watch all of your sticky bombs, building takeovers, and essential sniping locations without the risk of everything crumbling when you look away for a moment.

While classic Company of Heroes playstyles look to be wholly supported, new factions and a new theater of war should create an environment that feels familiar to the WWII era while moving the battlefield to the Mediterranean. Instead of settings we've seen in games so many times before, like Normandy, players take the fight to coastal Italy and Northern Africa. Mountainous regions and deserts offer new challenges and strategies for players to explore. Company of Heroes 3 features more factions than ever before, allowing for many different playstyles and ap-proaches to combat. While a lot of these are unannounced at this time, we can expect to have Italian forces available, given the locale.

Company of Heroes 3 won't be here until late 2022, but chances to play before then in various alphas, betas, and other tests are likely to dot the landscape. » **Daniel Tack**

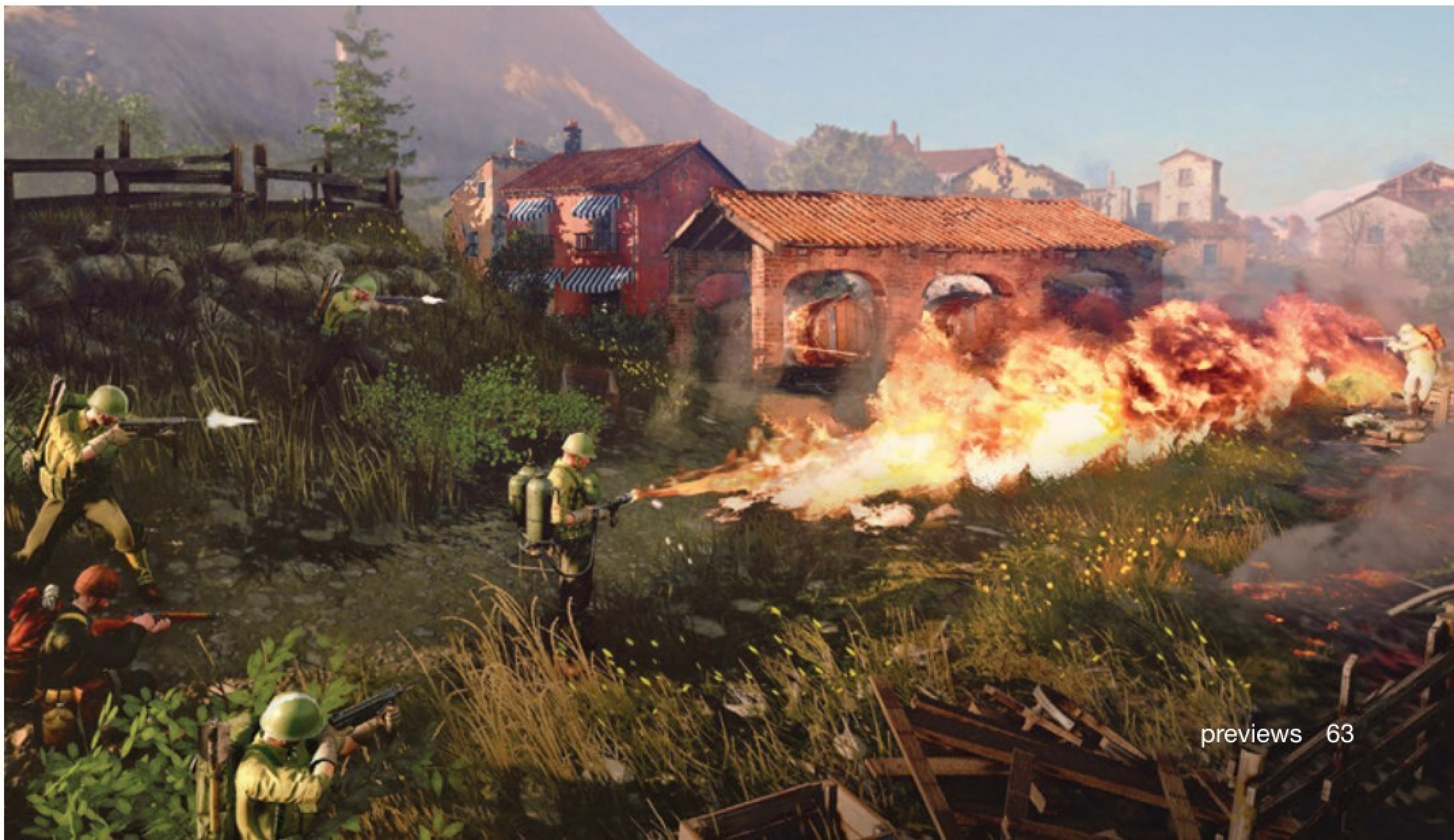
» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Strategy
(Online TBA)

» Publisher
Sega

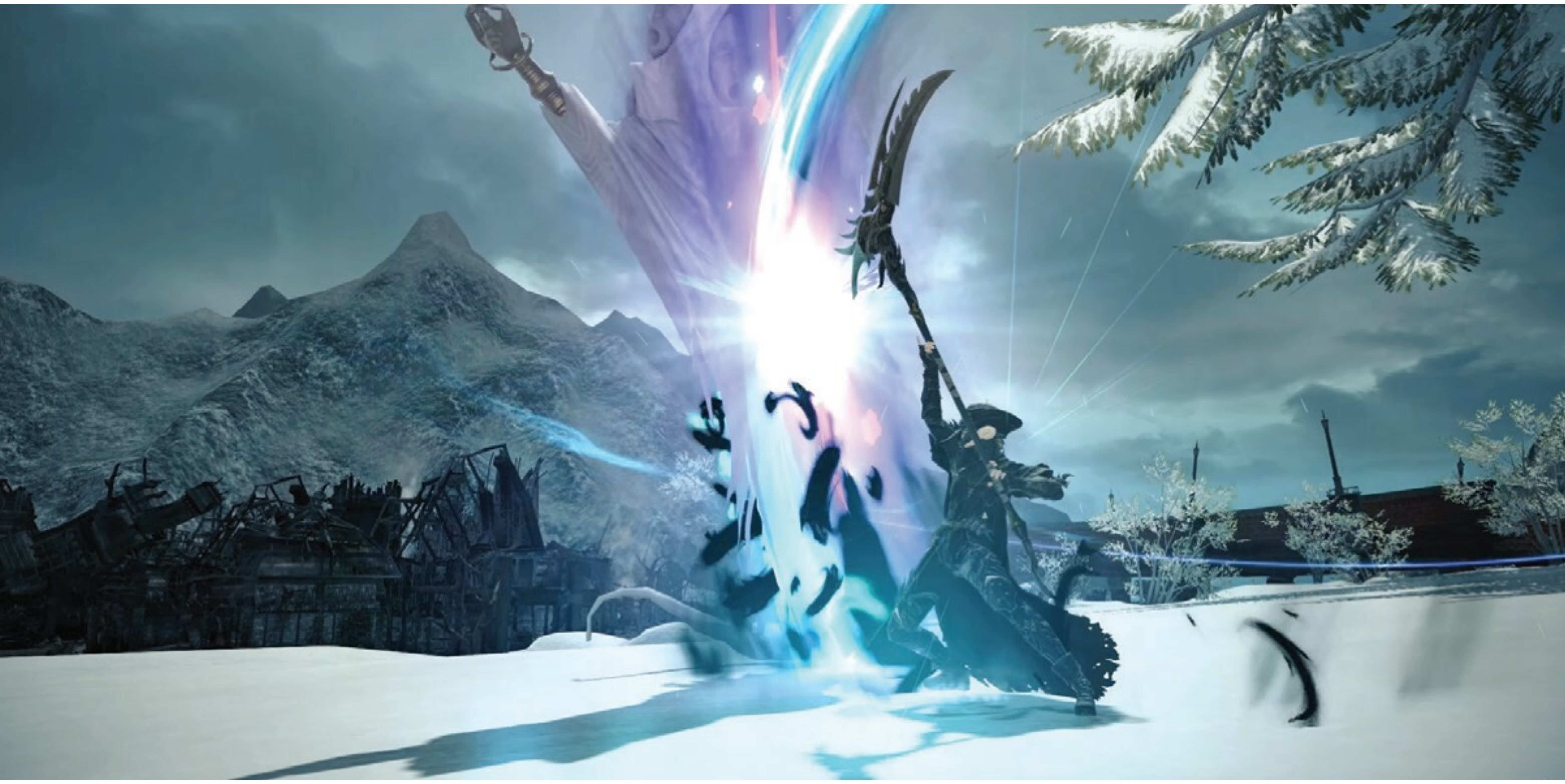
» Developer
Relic Entertainment

» Release
2022



Final Fantasy XIV: Endwalker

That expansion came from the moon



» **Platform**
PS5 • PS4 • PC

» **Style**
MMORPG

» **Publisher**
Square Enix

» **Developer**
Square Enix

» **Release**
November 23

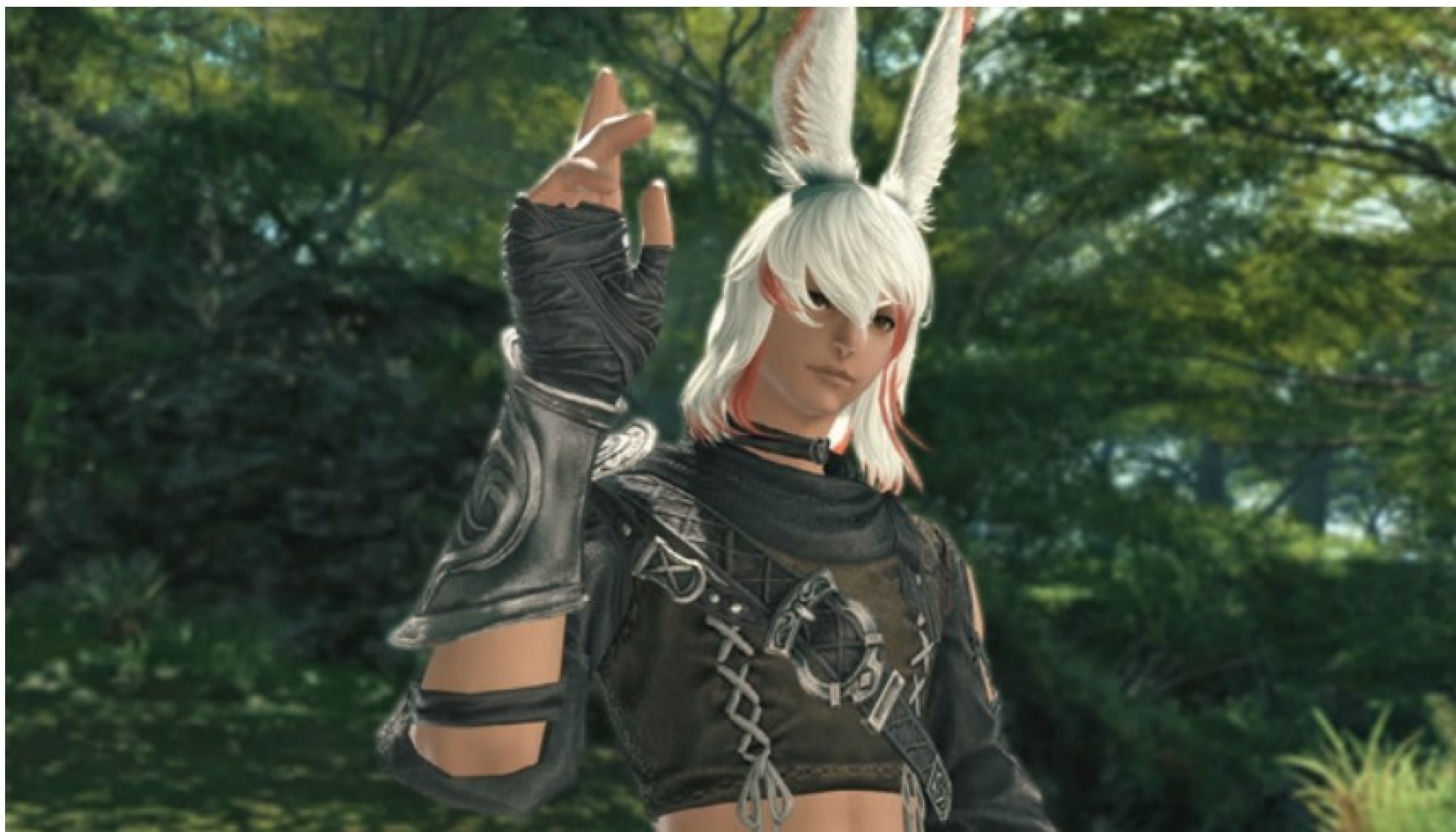
Shadowbringers was a massive highlight in the long history of Final Fantasy XIV. With it, players got to experience the best of enormous setpiece encounters, incredible music, and even eschew the MMO concept of finding dungeon companions as the Trust system provided fully-kitted NPC allies to take on challenges. With Endwalker, Square Enix aims to wrap up story arcs that have been running since the beginning of A Realm Reborn and once again take adventurers to epic settings and through nostalgic Final Fantasy scenarios. Are you ready to head to the moon?

The moon and its associated end-game dungeon were some of the more iconic slices of Final Fantasy IV, full of incredibly dangerous bosses and beautiful crystal architecture. In Endwalker, as players travel to the moon and more, they're faced with the end of the world as the final days encroach the lands. It's a concept certainly used before, but a doomsday finale is always a good way to bring about the end of an arc.

Alongside a new level cap, players can explore two new jobs: the Sage and Reaper. The Sage is a healer with a mystical, high-tech alchemical look with special foci that channel sorcerous power. The spinning foci around the Sage give it a stylized look sure to attract players, even ones that don't generally like the healing role. The Reaper is essentially a melee necromancer that harvests the souls of the fallen to empower a wide variety of attacks. With huge scythes and cool-looking hats, Reapers are going to be everywhere as a new damage role. Also, you can now be a male Viera. That's right, the ones with the bunny ears. Get ready for a whole new world of cosplay.

Endwalker comes with loads of expected expansion staples, such as new primary city hubs, dungeons, a high-end raid, and a smattering of smaller updates to existing side activities such as the Gold Saucer casino. We know that the new challenging raid is Pandaemonium, likely a new take on the age-old Final Fantasy II dungeon located in Hell. If this place is anything like the Final Fantasy II location, expect plenty of interesting encounters, amazing music, and eye candy around every corner. That's the standard for FFXIV at this point, anyway.

Endwalker should wrap up some of the stories that hundreds of hours of gameplay have gone into telling, creating a fresh point for the game to move forward in a post-Endwalker world. While we don't know what will happen in the final days of the Final Fantasy XIV world, apocalyptic scenarios can provide exciting points for new beginnings. Like, what if they went through with it and started an entirely new campaign out of a true cataclysm? It could happen. We'll have to see later this year. » **Daniel Tack**



Neon White

Shoot your way through Heaven

Ben Esposito isn't making Neon White for everyone – in fact, even though he admits it's probably not the best marketing move, he says he's trying to make a cult game. He wants Neon White to find players that love it the way he loves the cult games that influenced him, like God Hand and El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron.

Put another way, Neon White is a game for "freaks."

The game centers on the aptly named Neon White, an assassin from Hell fighting demons in an attempt to secure a new life in Heaven. While on the surface the gameplay looks like an anime-inspired Quake or other similar first-person shooter jump map homage, Neon White's hook comes from its card system and how it affects combat.

In Neon White, cards are guns. Depending on what card you have, that's what gun you're using; if you have the pistol card, you're shooting a pistol. "However, before it's been used up of all its weapon magic, let's say – this is so silly," Esposito admits, laughing. "Before it's used up all its weapon magic, I can at any time choose to discard it actively, which will get rid of the card but instantly, I'll be able to do a movement ability. So, like the pistol, for instance, lets me do a double jump in the air. The rifle lets me dash forward and kill anything in my path."

The result, judging by the trailer, is a tense game of juggling priorities as you jump around each level blasting enemies. Admittedly, it looks a bit too intense for standard controls and more suited for a keyboard and mouse setup. It'll be interesting to see how and if it works better on one versus the other when the game is released.

Most people likely caught wind of Esposito from his previous project, Donut County, a cute, relaxing game about a mischievous raccoon. Visually, Neon White stands in stark contrast, borrowing amply from anime and smaller, more experimental Japanese games we don't see much of anymore. Shinji Mikami's work in the 2000s, like the aforementioned God Hand, is an inspiration, Esposito says. As are games by Goichi Suda, such as Killer7 and No More Heroes. Neon White's life-sim aspects pull from the Danganronpa and Persona series. All of this is on top of hero shooter elements informed by games such as Team Fortress 2.

It's an interesting, albeit bizarre, hodgepodge of different influences all coming together in a game that looks visually distinct from other games in 2021 while also feeling and sounding nostalgic for fans of Japan's early-to-mid 2000s game scene. And, of course, that's the point. Neon White looks like a game made for that specific audience, even if it's not the biggest in the world.

"Yeah, so I don't know if everyone else involved likes to hear that I want to make a cult game because financially making a cult game isn't a great idea," Esposito says. "And what I wanted to do with Neon White was make it so this game is not trying to be for everyone. It's trying to be a game for really specific people. And if it does hit correctly, for those people, it will be their favorite game. That's really what I'm trying to do." » **Blake Hester**

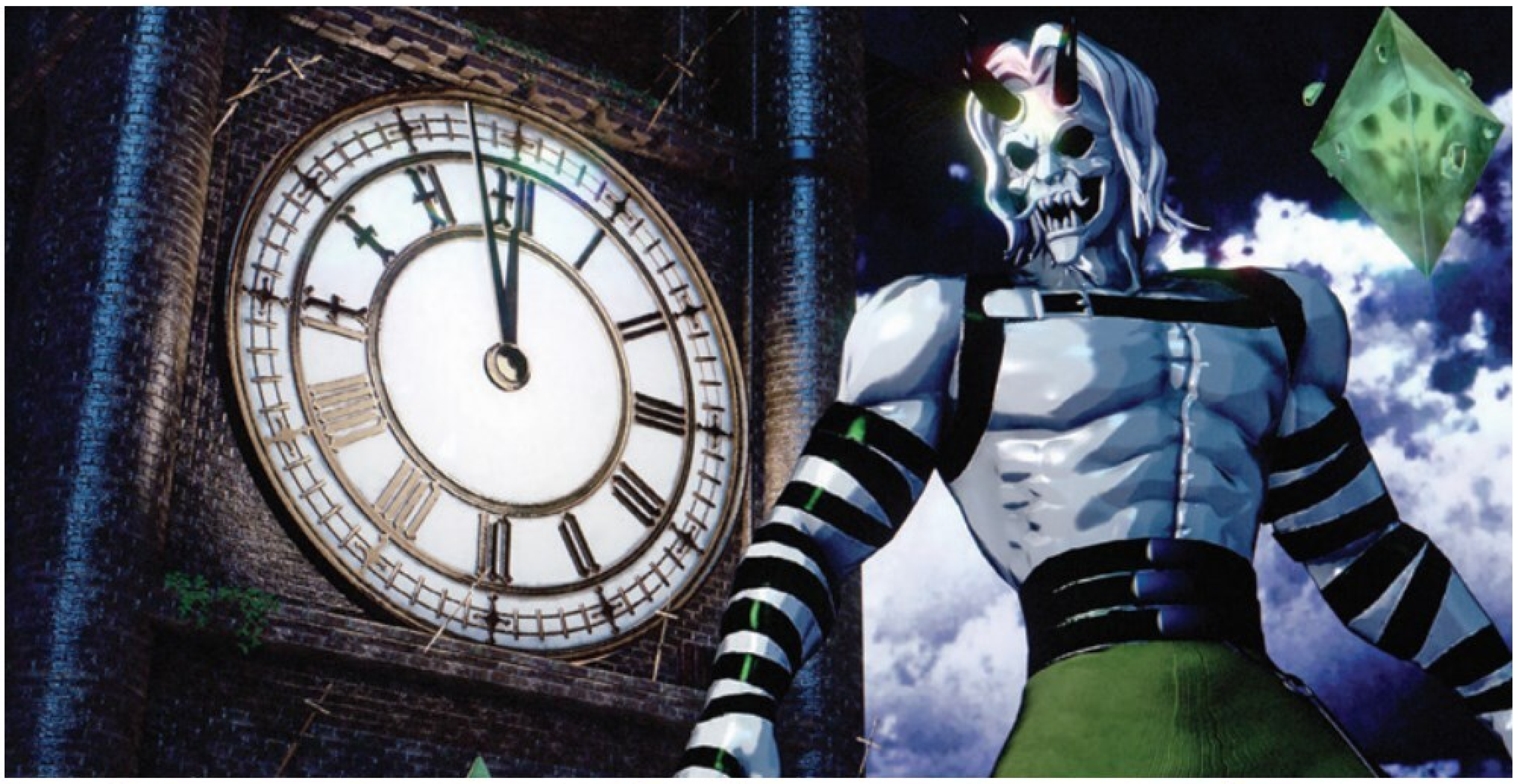
» Platform
Switch • PC

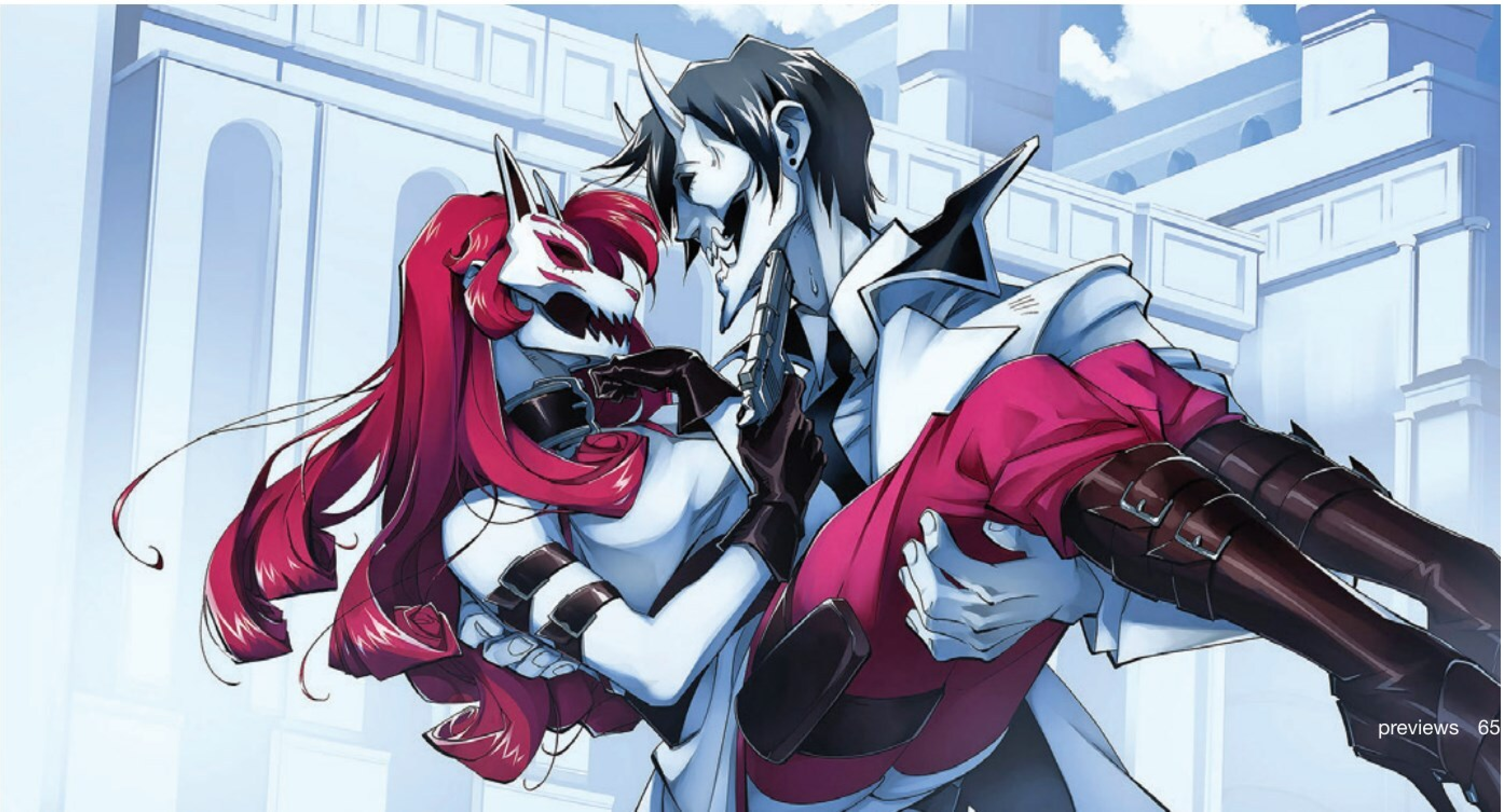
» Style
1-Player Shooter

» Publisher
Annapurna Interactive

» Developer
Angel Matrix

» Release
Winter





NHL 22

The superstar difference

PPG PAINTS ARENA
RITUAL
BAUER
CCM

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One

» Style
1 to 4-Player Sports
(12-Player Online)

» Publisher
EA Sports

» Developer
EA Vancouver

» Release
October 15

NHL 22 is ushering in a new console generation in style. This entry marks the first year the game launches on the PS5 and Xbox Series X/S, and it's coming with a new look to celebrate, thanks to the series finally moving to EA's Frostbite engine for both the new and previous-gen versions. Outside of visual upgrades, EA Vancouver looks like a team pinning all its hopes on its superstar talent to bring in the fans and victories, and it just might work.

After making his cover debut on NHL 20, Auston Matthews of the Toronto Maple Leafs will grace the cover again. We usually don't see a repeat cover this quickly, but Matthews is coming off an incredible season, scoring 66 points in 52 games and winning the Rocket Richard Trophy for being the top goal scorer in the league. The Leafs' disappointing playoff run aside, Matthews is always fun to watch, as he's one of the most creative and dynamic players in the game. Mostly though, he is a difference-maker, and EA Vancouver wants the league's superstars to feel just like that when they're on the ice.

Inspired by EA's Madden series, this year introduces X-Factors for the elite players in the league. "Madden did a phenomenal job of telling stories of what makes a player special with their X-Factor feature set," says NHL 22 producer Clement Kwong. "Not only does it enable great storytelling as we elevate the superstars, but [it] also introduces a new meta to gameplay that injects more strategy and competition for our core – something we haven't really done to gameplay in recent years."

X-Factors will benefit every major mode in the game, forcing players to adapt to the different skills and playing styles of hockey's best. They come in two ability tiers: zone and superstar. "Elite players who possess game-changing talent and single-handedly use that to impact the outcome of the game are assigned zone abilities," Kwong explains. "This is what defines the player and what the player is known for. These are very powerful abilities, so we only assign one for each eligible player." According to Kwong, the other tier, superstar abilities, are less powerful and more common, but players can be assigned one or more. These will be perks, such as great stickhandling, great shot through screens, and great peripheral passers. About 100 players will have superstar abilities at launch, whereas about 50 will have zone abilities. Some elite players will have both a zone ability and multiple superstar abilities.

Kwong showed us Auston Matthews' zone ability called "Shock & Awe," which grants him exceptional power and accuracy shooting out of, or shortly after, a deke. You will have to decide how to defend and counter this because you're bound to get burned by a high-scoring chance if you ignore him. "All of these abilities will have an impact on how you play the game," Kwong says. "Players will need to be aware of who's on the ice, how to deal with them, and how to create their own advantages." These special abilities will also extend to goalies. For instance, two-time Stanley Cup and 2021 Conn Smythe winner Andrei Vasilevskiy has the Contortionist zone ability, which means he has the athleticism to stretch and twist himself to make impossible saves look easy. Translation: He's probably going to make some devastating saves on you.

NHL 22 wants you to constantly adapt to the competition, whatever challenges these skilled players bring your way. Franchise Mode will also accommodate X-Factors in new scouting reports, letting you scout pro and amateur players. X-Factors will also affect line chemistry, as you want to mix and match players with complementary abilities. Time to pair up the expert passers with the deadly snipers.

For modes like Be A Pro, your player will earn X-Factor abilities throughout their career, with special challenges to earn X-Factor points and unlock more slots for them. In HUT, players with X-Factors will undoubtedly be the most sought-after player items; some cards will also have upgrade slots available to add a zone ability. And yes, X-Factors will also make their way into CHEL, where you get one default zone ability, depending on the archetype you select (e.g., Power Forward). You also have more ways to customize your skater, as you can invest points you earn into what skills you want within that specific archetype.

EA's NHL series looks the best it ever has, with better lighting, uniform improvements, and enhanced player likenesses. Time will tell how these X-Factors change the competition, but it's about time we had some new challenges to confront on the ice. After all, isn't part of the fun stopping the very best? » **Kimberley Wallace**

Astria Ascending

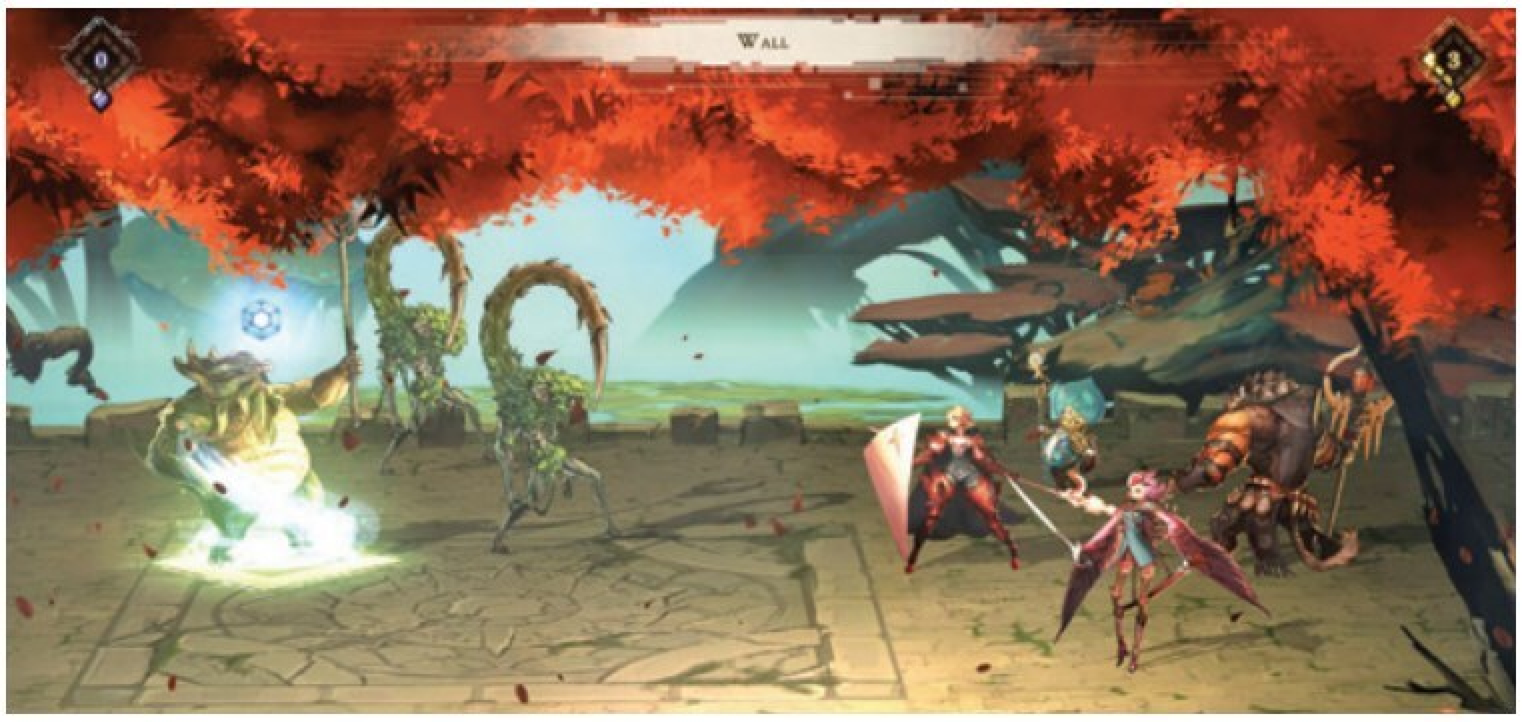
Illuminating the beauty of turn-based combat

Astria Ascending's gorgeous 2D hand-drawn visuals, alongside the impressive JRPG talent involved in the project, caught our attention. Astria Ascending's story is written by Kazushige Nojima, best known for his work on the Final Fantasy series, spanning from VII to today with XV and VII Remake. Composer Hitoshi Sakimoto, who provided memorable scores for Final Fantasy XII, Vagrant Story, and Valkyria Chronicles, is behind the music. The game's beauty and exciting talent speak for themselves, but a vital element to any gaming experience is its combat and progression loop. I recently went hands-on with Astria Ascending to see what's in store.

Astria Ascending takes plenty of cues from Square Enix's Bravely Default series, emphasizing using your turns wisely, maximizing the potential of your party members' job abilities, and having elemental strengths and weaknesses integral to your success. In the game, players control eight customizable heroes, known as the Demigods, who have the fate of the world on their shoulders when mysterious creatures called Noise show up and threaten the world's harmonious state.

After playing over five hours of Astria Ascending, it's clear the main attractions are its turn-based combat and the different abilities you unlock via the job system. You have four members in your party at a time but can swap in other members if necessary. The Focus Point system makes it so you never feel like you're wasting a turn, as you can use a turn to "focus," which means stocking these points to make abilities more powerful later. The best strategy is to find an enemy's weakness and then have your party members save up focus points on turns, so when it gets to the character with the desired elemental ability, they can unleash a charged-up version for deadly damage.

Astria Ascending shows promise, but I hope some areas get improved before launch, especially the atrocious voice acting. I loved building my characters, picking their jobs, and deciding where to invest my skill points. But the dungeons were boring, straightforward affairs, and I worry about the difficulty balancing and the potential reliance on grinding to get the skills necessary to succeed. » **Kimberley Wallace**



» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player Role-Playing

» Publisher
Dear Villagers

» Developer
Artisan Studios

» Release
September 30

COMING SOON...
American Fugitive
ALSO ON PS4
Streets of Rage 4 Anniversary Edition
ALSO ON PS4
RiMS Racing
ALSO ON PS4/XBOX
Port Royale 4
ALSO ON PS5
Tails of Iron Crimson Knight Edition
ALSO ON PS5/PS4/XBOX
Instant Sports Paradise
15 Beach Games
Chernobylite
Where the Heart Leads
EVERYONE to MATURE 17+ E-M ESRB esrb.org
GameStop
POWER TO THE PLAYERS

Call Of Duty: Vanguard

Special forces come together

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Shooter
(Online Multiplayer TBA)

» Publisher
Activision

» Developer
Sledgehammer Games

» Release
November 5

This year, Call of Duty heads back to World War II as a backdrop for Call of Duty: Vanguard. While the WWII setting has been used repeatedly, Sledgehammer Games is taking a hyper-focused look into the teams – what would be known as special forces – and their conception here as a small squad attempting to unravel a secret plot. Vanguard explores WWII with traditional environments we've seen before but also numerous other fronts and theatres. Players head to North Africa, the Eastern Front, the Western Front, and the Pacific in both the single-player campaign and multiplayer. The developer is aiming for 60 frames-per-second on all platforms for a fluid combat experience. In addition to Sledgehammer helming the campaign, Treyarch is lending its zombie talents for a Zombies mode, and Raven is coming in with a brand new Warzone map. Seeing many Call of Duty studios come together to deliver this time around in their areas of expertise is refreshing and should make for something interesting.

In the campaign, players take on the role of a specialized squad ready to head into the heart of Berlin to discover the terrible truth behind the Phoenix Project. The specific details are unknown, but it's the plan to shape the future of the Nazis and the Reich after Hitler's fall. While the tale, and everything associated with it, is historically inspired, plot points like the Phoenix Project take some significant liberties with the actual past.

The crew is a lively, multinational group of characters under the leadership of British Sergeant Arthur Kingsley. Lieutenant Polina Petrova plays the Russian sharpshooter of the group, inspired by the famous sniper Lyudmila Pavilchenko. We have fighter pilot Captain Wade Jackson from America, who performs admirably at Midway and is later shot down and picked up by passing infantry. And finally, Australian infantry Lucas Riggs rounds out the motley crew to assemble our team. Drawn to each other by fate and circumstance as the war rages on, this special forces assemblage eventually gets tasked with heading to Berlin to unravel a mystery and put an end to a new Reich – before it begins.

In terms of multiplayer, there will be a hefty 20 maps available at launch. As always, some new elements keep Vanguard fresh, even for veteran players. Reactive environments allow players to blow out bookcases, walls, boards, windows, and more to create additional sightlines, making once safe locations dangerous and keeping the game dynamic. Perhaps even more interesting, combat pacing is a new setting you can select in your quickplay options.

There are three different "combat paces" to explore, from tactical, which features longer times to engagement and lower player counts, to blitz, which has many players and an extremely short time to engagement. Whether you like to set up and perfect your snipe shots or rush into the fray, combat pacing should help find a style that's right for you alongside traditional multiplayer elements. A new gameplay mode, Champion Hill, is an 8-team extravaganza where players battle down to the last team.

With Sledgehammer helming a WWII story, Treyarch tackling Zombies, and Raven bringing the Warzone, Call of Duty: Vanguard is tapping into tons of specialized talent. We'll see how it all comes together in November.

» **Daniel Tack**

Call of Duty: Vanguard is published by Activision, a company currently confronting a crisis involving abuse of power and harassment. To read more, see p. 10.

Halo Infinite

Spartan testing protocols: Initiated

Leading up to Halo Infinite's holiday launch, 343 Industries recently began a round of technical previews for the game's multiplayer. While the first flight mainly consisted of 4v4 Slayer matches against bots, I had enough time to grasp how Infinite plays.

Three maps were available for testing, all of which were compact battlefields built with player agency in mind. Available first was a Spartan training facility named Live Fire, followed the next day by Recharge, a vertically tiered power plant reminiscent of the classic map Prisoner. Finally, Bazaar, a market-themed battlefield set in Mombasa, rounded out the available maps. Because each map is dense with hallways, corridors, and open areas, I never felt I lacked choice while engaging in a fight.

Classic Halo has several hard-to-replicate intangibles, but in my time at war against the bots, 343 is nailing the feel of the first few games. Laying in heavy assault rifle fire and closing the distance to crack the target with a melee attack is as satisfying as ever. Infinite also replicates the weightier movement and floatier jumps Halo is known for compared to faster-paced peers like Call of Duty and Apex Legends.

343 isn't wholly replicating the Bungie-era Halo design. Ledge clambering makes a return from Halo 5, feeling snappy and natural. A new deployable items system includes active camouflage, drop walls, and motion sensors collected during combat. A new item making the transition from Infinite's campaign, the Grappleshot, allows for spicier maneuvers, including flinging yourself into the air for wild aerial shots and snagging weapons from afar.

Core Halo weapons like the Assault Rifle, Plasma Pistol, Battle Rifle, and Needler deliver similar performances to their Halo 3 counterparts. At the same time, the default sidearm in Infinite was a notably capable weapon, precise enough to land clutch shots at a distance. However, a new shotgun variant called the Heatwave is particularly disappointing. Despite its cool gimmick of shooting ricocheting projectiles, it never deals enough damage on a direct hit compared to less flashy weapons. Hopefully, this and other lingering balance issues, like increasing grenade damage, will receive tweaks by launch.

Also available in this initial flight was a look at the battle pass, which rewards cosmetic items, including color schemes and new armor pieces. These parts range from helmets and visors to individual shoulder, leg, and arm pieces to mix and match a unique Spartan look. Leveling up the pass requires players to complete daily challenges with a specific goal. For example, earning kills with certain weapons or completing rounds of a particular type of match rewards experience upon completion. XP boosts and cards, which swap out daily challenges, filled out the remaining slots on this demo reward track.

Considering 343 has plenty to fix and adjust, my time with Halo Infinite has been a blast. It's shaping up to be a reason for fans of the original trilogy to return to the series when it launches (hopefully) later this year.
» **John Carson**

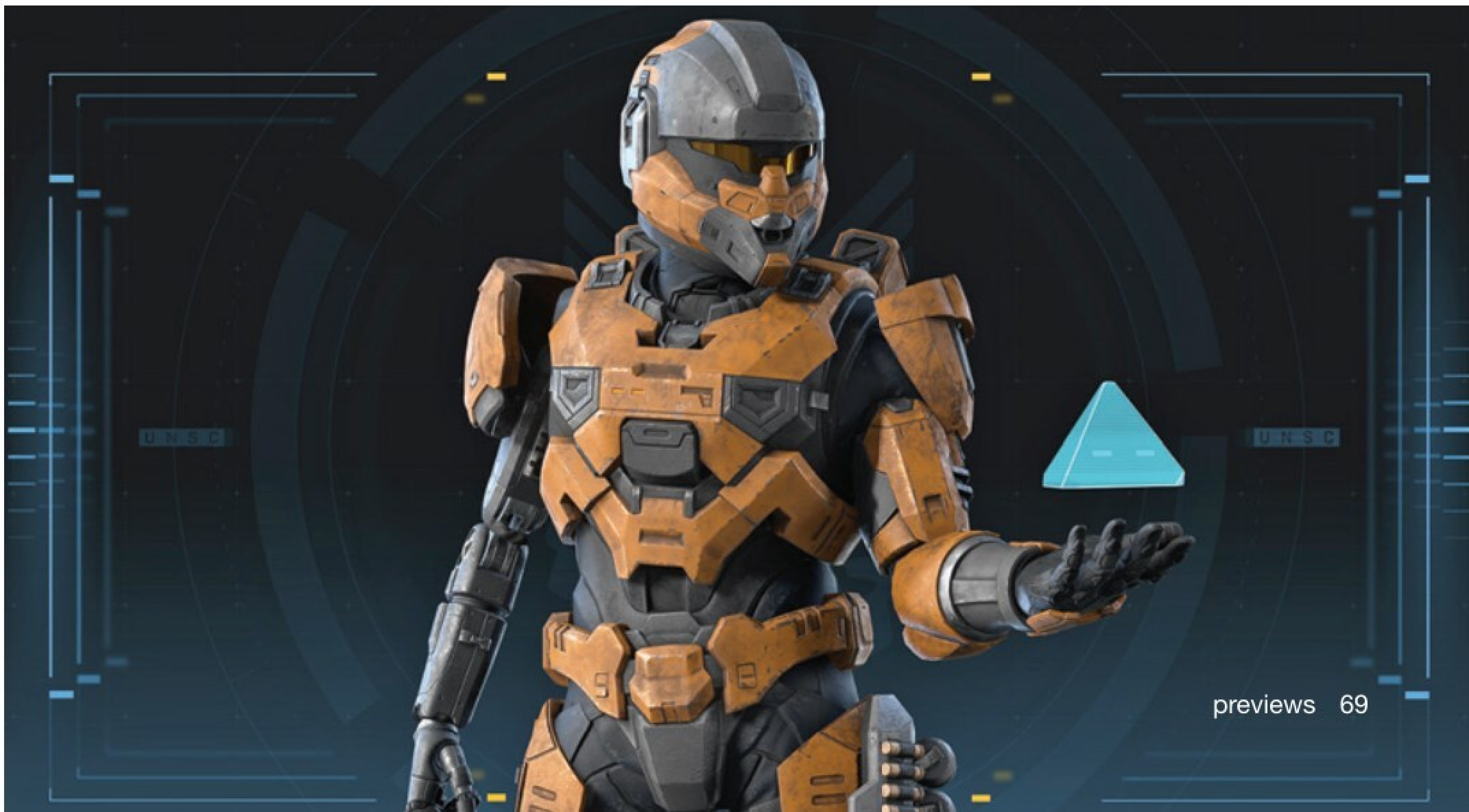
» **Platform**
Xbox Series X/S
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Shooter
(24-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Xbox Game Studios

» **Developer**
343 Industries

» **Release**
December 8

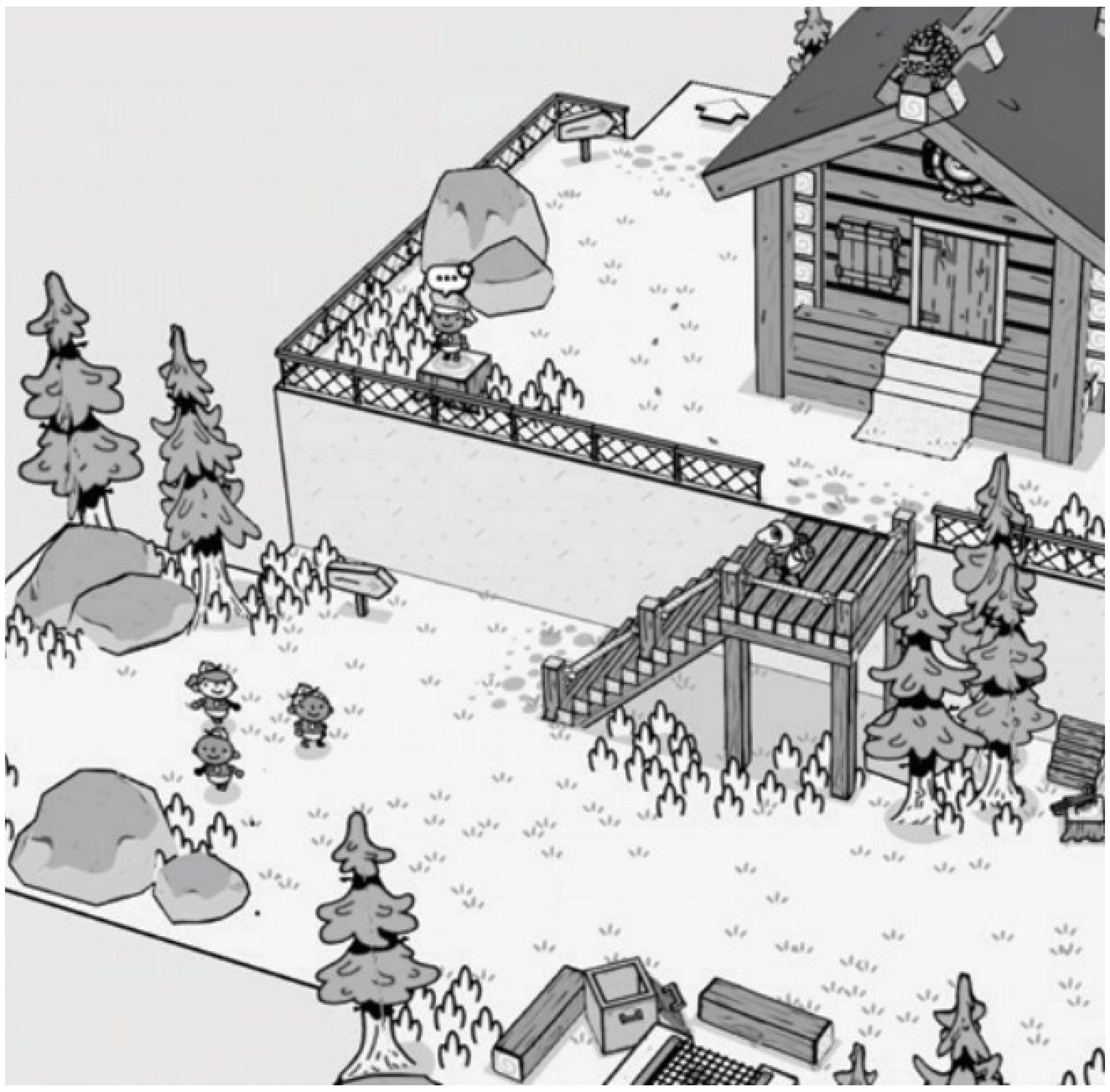


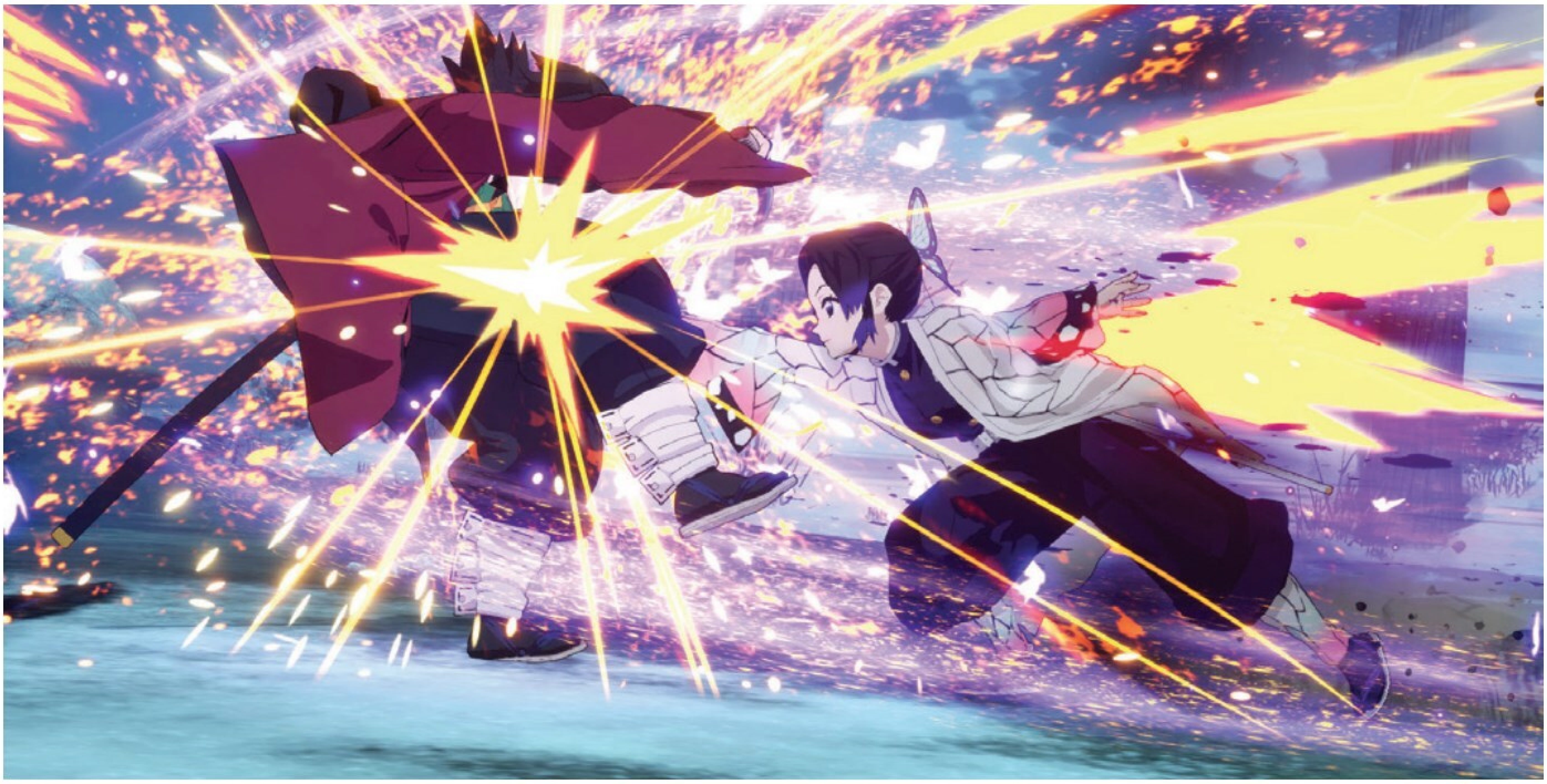
Stray

Developer BlueTwelve recently unveiled a new look at its upcoming adventure game Stray. Playing as a cat in a city full of cyborgs, players adopt feline movesets to climb over narrow ledges and through tight spaces. We also saw an enemy, which looked similar to a big bug. The cat avoided these enemies by quickly dodging and using a light-based weapon, destroying them on contact. Stray is set to be released in early 2022.

Toem

Gamers looking for time to relax should take note of this black-and-white delight. Described by developer Something We Made as a photographic adventure with calm music, Toem sets the player on a quest to reach the game's highest peak to experience the titular phenomenon. Along the monochromatic path, you'll meet a cast of colorful characters who will ask for favors – all of which require your trusty camera. Toem will be released for Switch and PC later this year.





Demon Slayer: Kimetsu No Yaiba - The Hinokami Chronicles

Demon Slayer took the world by storm back in 2019, and the recent *Mugen Train* movie is Japan's highest-grossing film of all time. So, it wasn't a matter of if we'd get a Demon Slayer video game; it was a matter of when. The Hinokami Chronicles follows Tanjiro's season 1 journey. Vivid art evocative of the beloved manga and flashy, frenetic combat designed by CyberConnect2 might make this a guaranteed purchase for anime fans on October 15.

Super Monkey Ball: Banana Mania

Super Monkey Ball fans, rejoice! Sega is remastering and repacking over 300 courses from Super Monkey Ball, Super Monkey Ball 2, and Super Monkey Ball Deluxe in Banana Mania. These 2000s-era stages have been shined up with an HD polish and can be played alone or with up to three other players in local co-op. Banana Mania also includes 12 classic mini-games, a story mode, new characters, online leaderboards, and more. AiAi will roll the clock back on October 5 for PlayStation and Xbox consoles, Switch, and PC.

Solar Ash

From the creators of Hyper Light Drifter, Solar Ash is a sci-fi action-adventure platformer. It follows the story of Rei as she tries to save her home from being swallowed by a black hole-like entity called the Ultravoid. The game's signature skating traversal helps you take on giant beasts as you delve deeper into the void. Launching October 26 for PlayStation 5, PlayStation 4, and PC, Solar Ash looks like one of the most compelling indies of 2021.

The Artful Escape

Francis Vendetti is a guitar prodigy smothered by his folk singer uncle's legend. Vendetti takes a stunning musical journey through space to break free from society's expectations and develop a new stage persona. The game will have more than one kind of star power with actors Lena Headey, Jason Schwartzman, Mark Strong, and Carl Weathers voicing the characters. The Artful Escape will be available via Game Pass on Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One, and PC on September 9.

Death Stranding Director's Cut

Death Stranding was the breakout title for Hideo Kojima's independently-owned studio, Kojima Productions. The open-world adventure featured a wide variety of content, but Kojima has even more up his sleeve with the Director's Cut. Featuring new character interactions, new missions, and mechanics that didn't quite make it into the final version of the game, this Director's Cut should be the perfect excuse for returning players to jump back in. Alternately, newcomers have an ideal definitive take to see what this wild world has to offer. Completely remastered for PS5, Death Stranding Director's Cut arrives on September 24.

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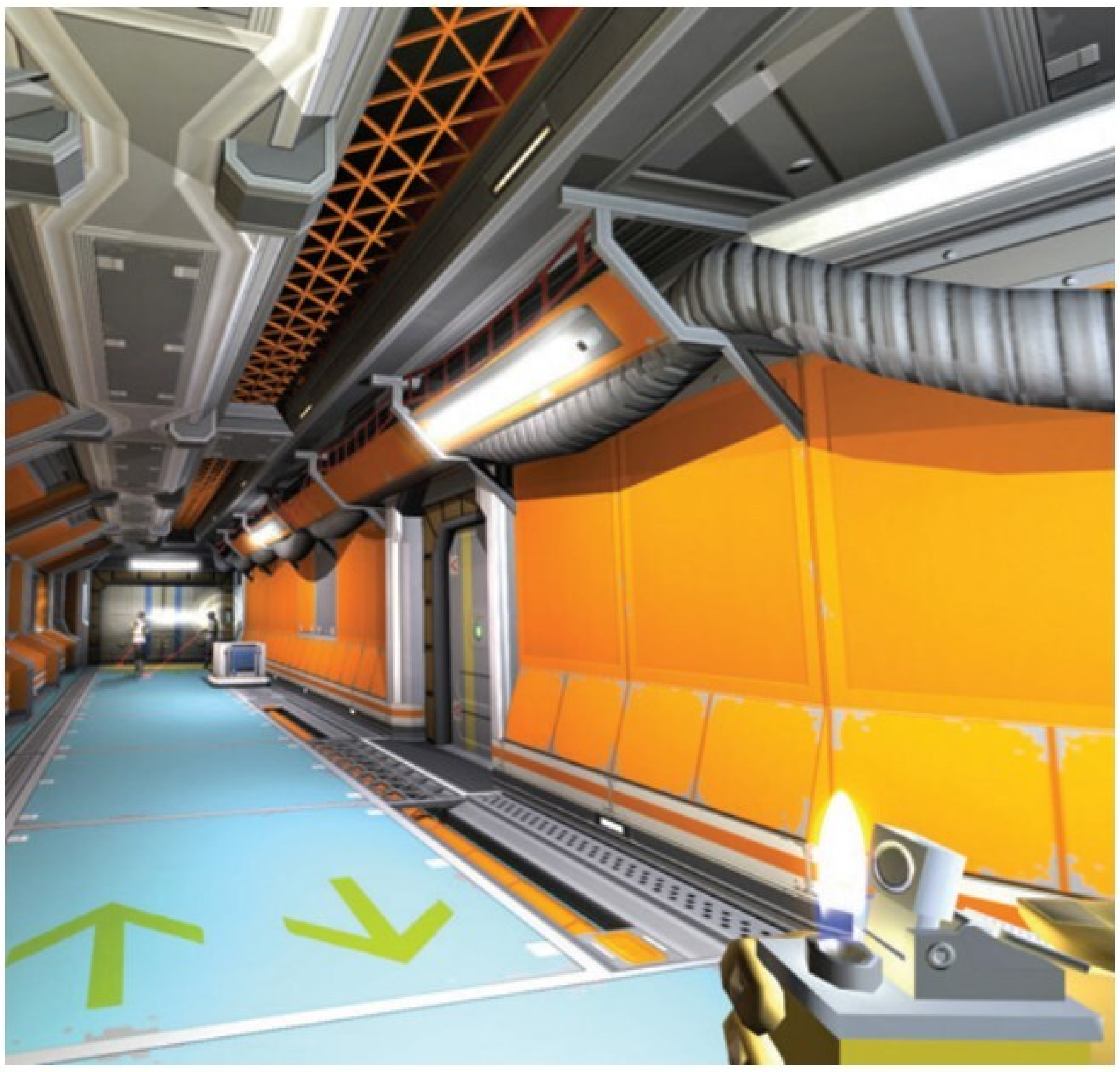
FRAGILE EXPRESS
FRAGILE EXPRESS



Skin Deep

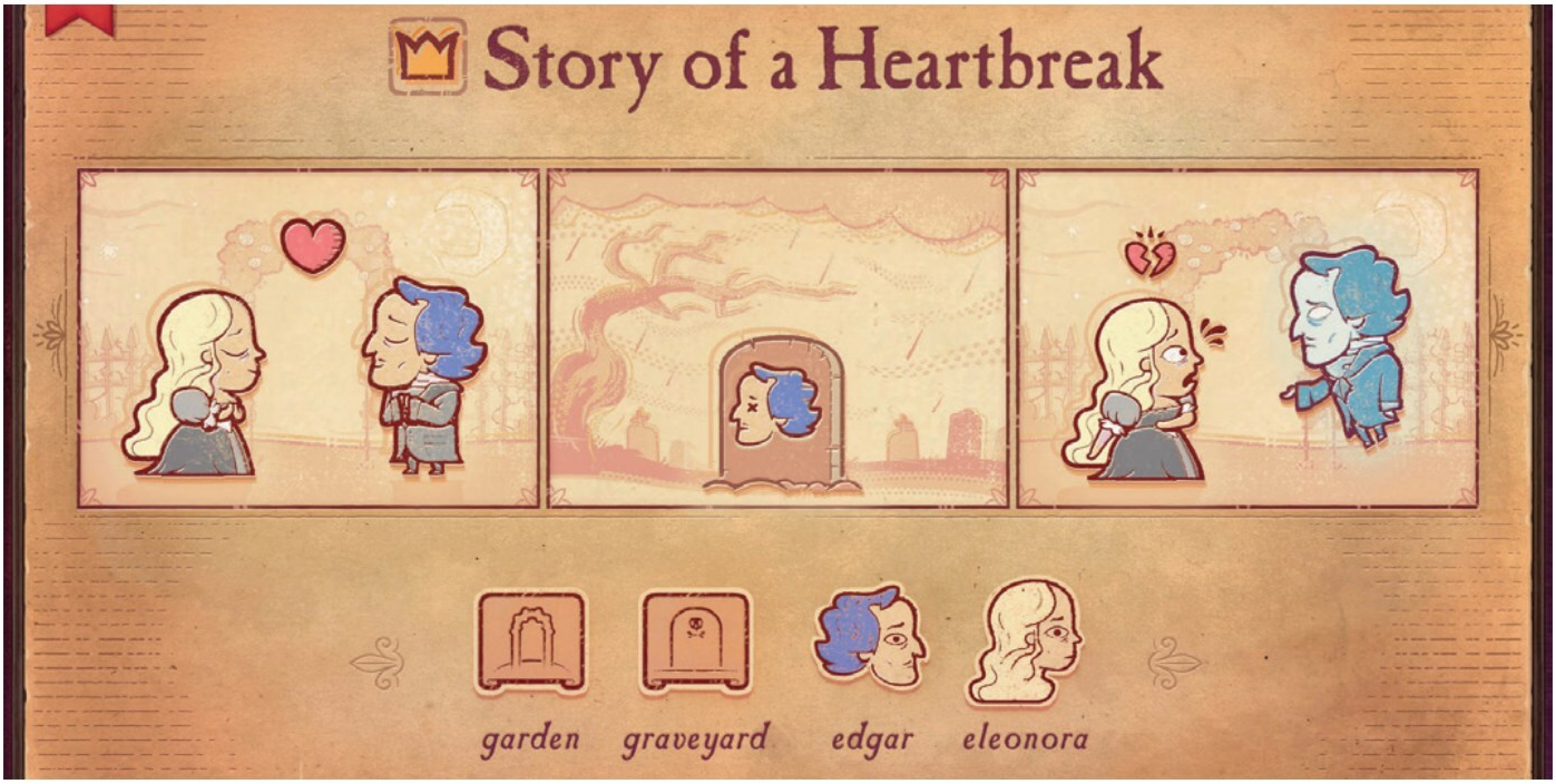
What do you get when you have a team that just wants to make a weird shooter? A game where cats are in charge. That's exactly what the team over at Blendo Games is doing with its newest title, Skin Deep, published by Annapurna Interactive. There's sneezing, there's getting weird stuff stuck to the bottom of your feet, and there's the need to survive while trying to escape a group of pirates after being frozen on a cargo ship by an insurance firm run by cats. This indie shooter is expected to arrive sometime this year on PC.

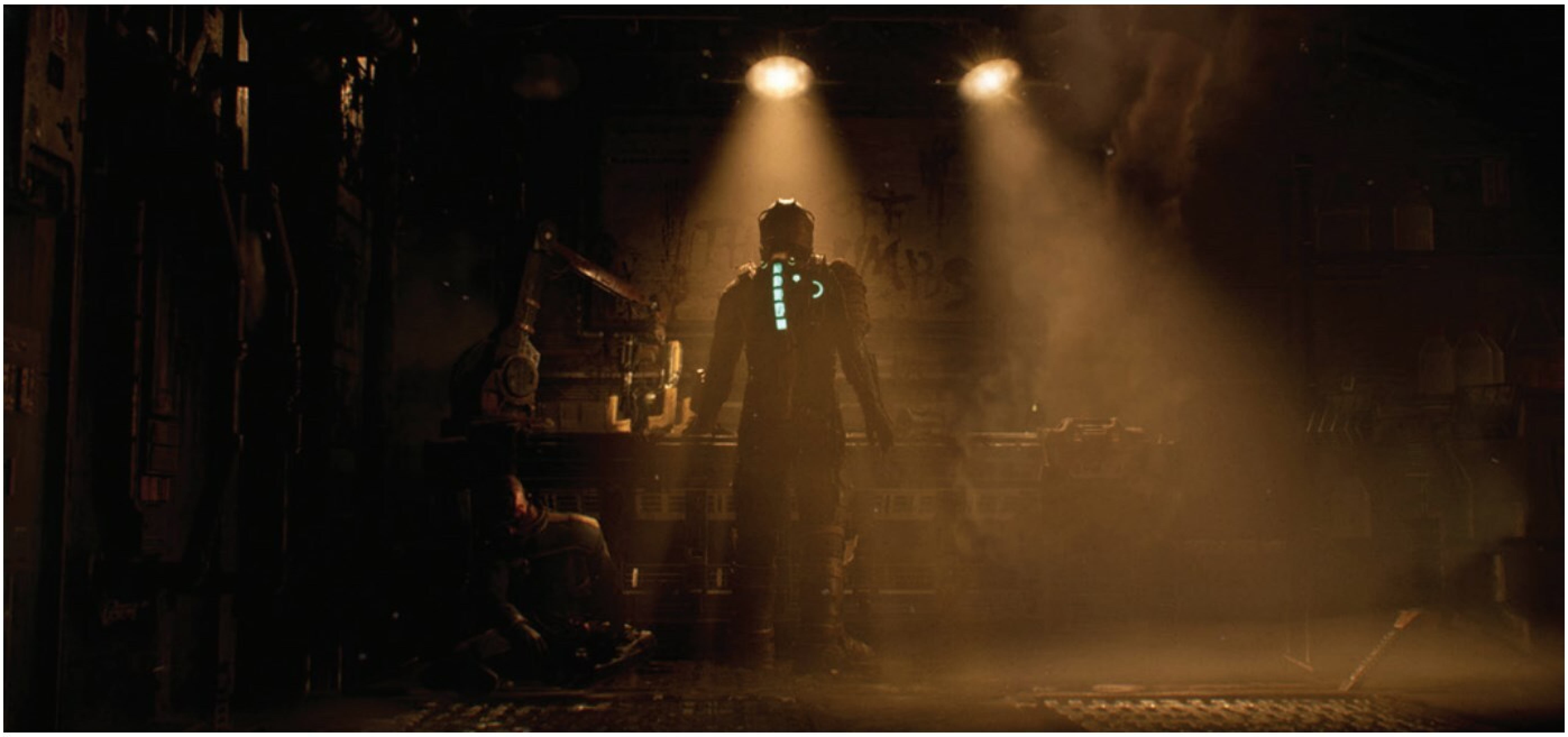
Ashes Of Creation

This upcoming medieval fantasy MMORPG places a greater emphasis on community interaction by permanently changing the game world based on players' actions. With a significant focus on exploration, Ashes of Creation features various gathering systems, crafting, and ample opportunities for trading. As players complete these activities, they can erect villages, towns, and cities with ecologies and economies that change as their populations shrink or expand. Ashes of Creation aims to bring back the social mechanics that defined the early days of MMOs, and we can't wait to see how the game shapes up when it hits PC. No release date yet, but alpha testing is already underway.

Storyteller

Storyteller is a creative spin on the puzzle genre where players have complete freedom to tell a story of their choosing. Whether it be a comedy or heartbreaking tragedy, players receive a toolbox filled with characters, settings, and emotions to craft a narrative that can inspire love, revenge, or any number of other feelings. Twist a supernatural tale, if that's your fancy, or go the more Shakespearean route. The choice is yours. Storyteller is coming to Switch and PC.

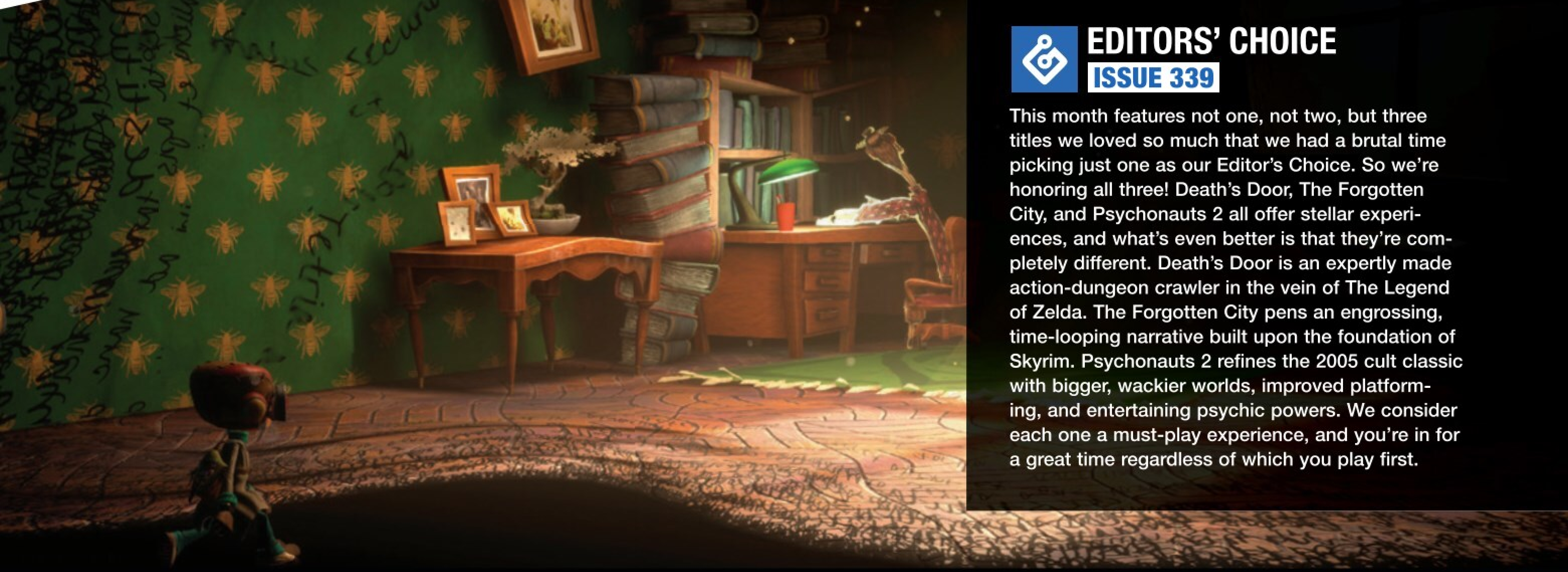




Dead Space

It's been 12 years since Dead Space first scared the pants off of players, and EA Motive is remaking the horror classic from the ground-up. Rebuilt using the powerful Frostbite Engine, Dead Space is a new-gen only experience on PS5, Xbox Series X/S, and PC. So far, we know gameplay will feature modernized tweaks and zero load screens. Motive is also drawing from the broader Dead Space lore to flesh out the existing narrative. Best of all, the remake will not have any microtransactions. Dead Space is early in development and currently has no release window, but we can't wait to relive our nightmares aboard this newly-renovated *Ishimura*.

reviews



EDITORS' CHOICE

ISSUE 339

This month features not one, not two, but three titles we loved so much that we had a brutal time picking just one as our Editor's Choice. So we're honoring all three! Death's Door, The Forgotten City, and Psychonauts 2 all offer stellar experiences, and what's even better is that they're completely different. Death's Door is an expertly made action-dungeon crawler in the vein of The Legend of Zelda. The Forgotten City pens an engrossing, time-looping narrative built upon the foundation of Skyrim. Psychonauts 2 refines the 2005 cult classic with bigger, wackier worlds, improved platforming, and entertaining psychic powers. We consider each one a must-play experience, and you're in for a great time regardless of which you play first.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Bolos. They're not ties!

For more information on the age classification ratings in our reviews, head to gameinformer.com/ratings

Death's Door

Reaping the rewards

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 339

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Devolver Digital **Developer** Acid Nerve **Release** July 20 **Rating** T

9

Xbox Series X/S
Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
As a reaper of souls working for an organization of crows, you must recover a stolen soul while unraveling a mystery surrounding figures who've lived for centuries

» **Graphics**
The black-and-white headquarters contrasts nicely with a colorful world, and Death's Door biomes are distinct visual treats

» **Sound**
Pleasant piano melodies and epic boss music perfectly suit the ebb and flow of combat and exploration

» **Playability**
I love the strategic loop of executing melee attacks to refill ranged abilities, and exciting boss fights push an otherwise simple combat system to enjoyable limits

» **Entertainment**
Death's Door presents a compelling world begging to be explored until every secret is found alongside satisfying combat and intriguing lore

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Death is one of the few things we all have in common. We all experience death sooner or later, and that can be terrifying because we don't truly know what awaits us on the other side. Salvation? Oblivion? Death's Door offers an amusing interpretation of death by framing it as a boring, day-to-day business run by crows. While some of the crows may not find much enjoyment in their work, playing Death's Door couldn't be further from their dull reality. It's an entertaining and engrossing action-adventure romp that you'd do well to enjoy before your time is up.

As a young crow and a rookie reaper working for this morbid organization, your task is to retrieve one particularly large soul. Once you do, however, it's promptly stolen by a mysterious figure. While this recovery mission to find why your assigned soul was taken is a good hook on its own, the story quickly expands into a larger, more compelling mystery revolving around figures who have cheated death for ages and the true meaning behind your work.

Relieving bad guys of their souls is a fun, strategic dance of dealing simple close-range combos and rolling to evade, all while chipping away at their health from afar using your bow and spells such as a fireball. You have a limited number of ranged shots, but ammo refills with every successful melee strike. I love this system as it kept me from leaning on ranged attacks as a crutch and forced me to get my hands dirty. It also rewards that aggression by renewing your chances to back off. Tight controls allow for smoothly dealing attacks after making split-second dodges, and that maneuverability improves by upgrading your abilities.

Other weapons, such as speedy daggers and a heavy electric hammer, perform fine but don't feel different enough from the starter sword. Thankfully, the same can't be said for your arsenal of spells, all of which feel useful. A chain hook attaches to foes so you can quickly zip in their face and close the gap. I smiled every time I lobbed a bomb-like fireball and watched it obliterate multiple targets in short order.

Challenging combat encounters pit you against sizable waves of baddies, forcing you to use every trick you have to survive. That includes deflecting their attacks and using environmental hazards, such as laser turrets, to your advantage. The handful of major boss battles against long-living titans are fantastic and are my favorite confrontations in the game. These epic bouts pushed me to use my full suite of abilities. The final confrontation, in particular, plays out as a neat amalgamation of every obstacle you faced before, offering an entertaining final exam of everything you've learned. In a great touch, enemy bodies accumulate scratches and cracks to indicate damage status, which is way cooler than a plain old health bar.

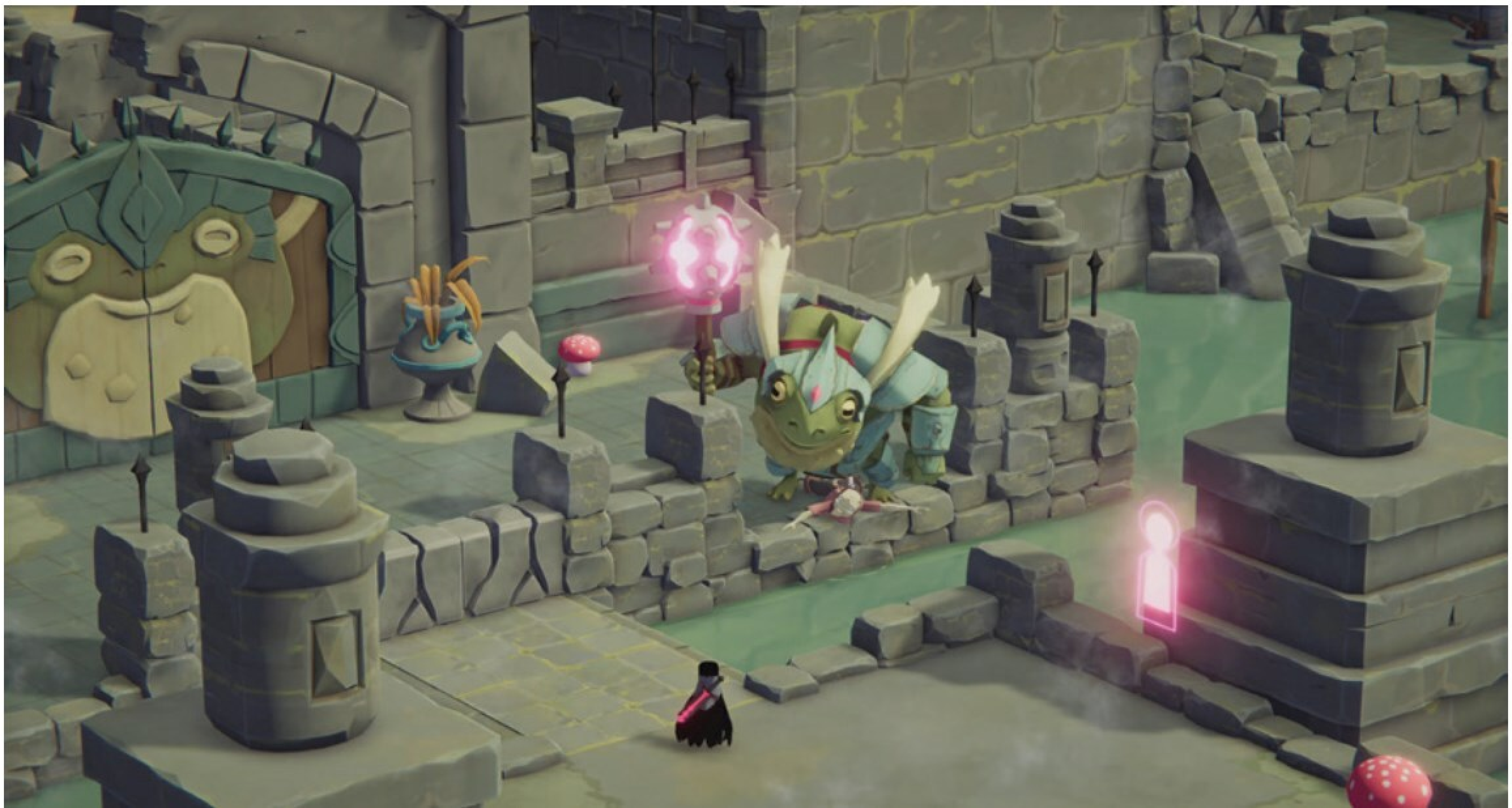
Your journey takes you through pretty, visually distinct areas such as seaside docks, an eerie-yet-opulent mansion, and a forest-covered temple. I also like how the living world's color contrasts with the noir-esque greyscale of your otherworldly headquarters. Areas are littered with secrets that lead to goodies such as new weapons, health-restoring flower seeds, collectibles, and vital souls used to purchase stat upgrades. You can even find hidden bosses that bestow powerful upgrades to your spells.

Many areas are ability-gated; I'm sure you can connect the dots on what a cracked wall or unlit torch requires. Other environmental puzzles and secrets require more observational skills, such as spotting discreet hedge maze entrances or using a bathroom floor's reflection to find a concealed door. Death's Door's world feels like a giant riddle that I was always champing at the bit to unravel fully. Plus, some of its coolest mysteries don't reveal themselves until after the credits roll.

Death's Door is more lighthearted than it looks, and that's to its benefit. Your quirky co-workers include a typing-obsessed data entry worker elated to generate all of the paperwork your adventure creates. A passionate bard tags along for a period in search of inspiration for a wacky song. A jovial knight cursed with a stewpot for a head is bluntly but hilariously named Pothead.

These amusing moments complement weightier themes about respecting the dead, the fear of death's inevitability, and whether anything we accomplish truly matters when our time is limited. Death's Door isn't the most profoundly written story, but it handles these sensitive topics well. My favorite moments, outside of its wonderful moment-to-moment action and exploration, are when it reminds us that death isn't something to be feared. Rather, it's just a necessary step in the cycle of life; a cycle that cannot exist without it.

» **Marcus Stewart**

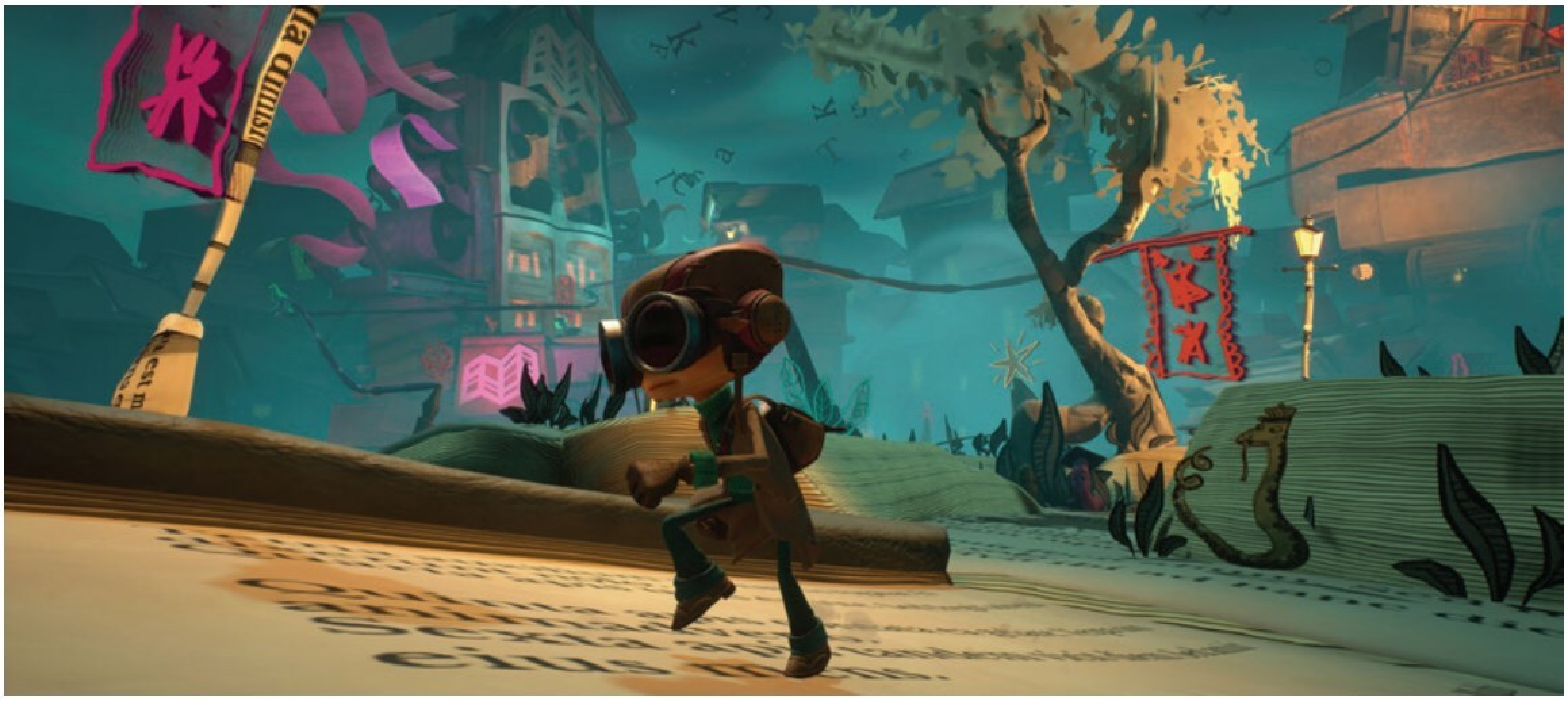


Psychonauts 2

Well worth the wait

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 339

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Xbox Game Studios
Developer Double Fine Productions **Release** August 25 **Rating** T



Over 16 years have passed between Psychonauts games, but not much time has elapsed for protagonist Razputin "Raz" Aquato. His scratchy, high-pitched voice still screams of youthful inexperience, and his actions almost always show an eagerness to learn.

That's precisely what developer Double Fine Productions has also done over the years. Time has allowed this arthouse studio to hone its platforming craft, sharpen its already hilarious wit, and create a sequel that shows off the tremendous complexity of the human brain and the thrill of unearthing its wonders. Psychonauts 2 invites players to explore colorful dreamscapes that melt into dangerous nightmares and quickly establishes the thought that almost every turn will lead to something unexpected and weird.

With summer camp behind him, Raz is now a talented intern for the Psychonauts, a psychic spy organization of superbeings dealing with a mole within their ranks. Raz wants to be involved in solving this mystery, yet his impulsiveness gets him into trouble early on, and he quickly needs to undo his mistakes. The story roars out of the gate with silly excitement and never slows thanks to clever jokes and a wonderfully realized cast of characters. Their banter is fantastic and usually offers deep insights into character motivations and personality, especially when Raz is diving through their minds. Some thoughts are disturbing and explore serious mental health issues, but Double Fine handles them with care, often framing them in artistic ways.

Many of the dreamscapes Raz explores will likely elicit an audible "wow" thanks to their visualization and dynamic compositions. Colorful, loud, jagged, and almost always with a claymation-like aesthetic, these worlds dazzle with their artistry and double as excellent playgrounds for the platforming experience at hand.

Although there's no shortage of animated story sequences to sit back and watch, Psychonauts 2 is a platformer at heart. Raz, who happens to be the son of acrobatic parents, follows in their footsteps with a bit more grace and skill. His leaping prowess, and the controls bringing it to life, are improved, but he still isn't moving with the precision and fluidity of Mario. A little uncertainty and guesswork come with gauging jump distances and grab points. That said, no platforming sequence is ever as unfairly challenging as the first game's death-dealing Meat Circus level. Psychonauts 2 consistently delivers solid platforming fun and encourages players to veer off the beaten path to find secret collectibles and upgrades.

Raz's newfound acrobatic status also transitions to combat, where dodge rolling and creating space are paramount. That distance is essential, as he doesn't have to punch every enemy he comes across and can now use a wide array of psychic powers to achieve victory from afar. He can start them on fire, riddle them full of holes with psi-blasts, or use other abilities to bring the censors and other enemies to their knees. Combat is vastly improved over the original game but is used sparsely, primarily within short arena-like conflicts or against bosses.

The spotlight isn't solely on platforming, however. Even those sequences often feel truncated given just how often Double Fine transitions to different gameplay sequences or story moments. The flow works, as it keeps the player off-kilter and unsure of what could happen next. In one moment, I chopped up an adorable bacon character to fry up and feed to a goat puppet, and in another, I was balancing precariously on top of a giant bowling ball. Most of the gameplay sequences are enjoyable and blend nicely with the platforming action. The constant shifting of gameplay types creates a problem in that the player frequently must pause to assign specific abilities to the action buttons.

Psychonauts 2 is mainly about Raz's psychic development but also focuses intently on the life of Ford Cruller, a character who appeared in the first game and is born again in a truly fascinating way. For the sake of spoilers, I won't go into Ford's involvement too deeply, but satisfying (and shocking) payoffs come from it, and the worlds he introduces to Raz are alarming in the best possible ways.

I adored almost every second of Psychonauts 2. It achieves something I don't often see in games – a continual sense of awe as each of its worlds unfold. It took 16 years to reach release, but Double Fine has delivered an incredible sequel. I hope we get a third installment that doesn't take nearly as long to create.

» **Andrew Reiner**

9

Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
A long-overdue sequel that pumps out psychic excitement in both its platforming and twisting narrative yarn

» **Graphics**
Each world leaps off the screen with colorful designs worth studying up close to see all the little artistic touches. Some of the texture work is a bit dated, however

» **Sound**
The wild dreamscapes come to life with melodies that bounce between peaceful and haunting. Voicework doesn't get much better than this ensemble

» **Playability**
Improved in almost every way over the original game. Having to map highly used gameplay abilities manually is annoying

» **Entertainment**
Well worth the wait and better than expected, Psychonauts 2 hits its stride early and never loses steam

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Madden NFL 22

Short of the first down

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (6-Player Online) **Publisher** EA Sports **Developer** EA Tiburon **Release** August 20 **Rating** E

Following vocal community backlash against last year's game, developer EA Tiburon looked to turn things around through an increased emphasis on Franchise and more noticeable improvements to gameplay. Madden NFL 22 takes the field with tons of potential, but its inability to differentiate from its predecessor, plus its many fumbles, wipe away much of the goodwill it garners.

Franchise mode remains a focus following EA Tiburon's shift to add to last year's mode post-launch. In addition to the post-release updates implemented by Madden NFL 21, this year's mode simplifies its user interface, giving you easy access to league news or information about your upcoming opponent. I like the new coach progression system, which lets you unlock perks like attribute boosts, better negotiation skills, and extra experience points for players.

However, my favorite Franchise addition this year comes in the form of the improved weekly strategy tools. Here, you plan for the specific team you're facing on both sides of the ball, plus dictate the intensity of your practices. While full practices grant stat boosts, they have a chance to leave your players banged up going into the game. I found it helpful to scope out your opponent's strengths and then apply temporary boosts to counter them.

When you finally step onto the field, the football action is solid but familiar. While I still noticed snapped-to animations, dumb mistakes from the A.I., and players running into each other post-play, better blocking and tackling make the trench battles more realistic. The feeling of a pocket closing around your QB is almost palpable, and I'm happy it's easier to blast through running lanes as a halfback. These incremental improvements add to the experience in tiny ways, but they still don't take the game forward enough to differentiate it from last year's title. However, my favorite additions come in the new atmosphere and momentum mechanics.

I love watching the new momentum meter react to the on-field action, unlocking advantages for the side in control. These modifiers often come in the form of hindrances for your opponent, like knocks to their stamina or hiding their receiver icons. Whenever my opponent stole the momentum, I always did whatever I could to chip away at their advantage. When the meter is heavily on one side's favor, the camera even shakes pre-snap, replicating the unease your on-screen players feel.

These mechanics carry over into Face of the Franchise, the series' single-player career mode. This year, you can play on the defensive side as a middle linebacker. I've always enjoyed Madden's offense more, but I liked stepping into the shoes of the field general of the defense with a new camera angle and more instructive play art. Even though you're right in the middle of the action, not every play comes your way, meaning your play calls are more important to your team's success than when you play quarterback where you touch every snap.

I like role-playing a hotshot rookie entering the league, trying to turn around a struggling franchise through weekly play and unique scenarios. As you go from week to week, you're presented with special situations like a big rivalry game, a weather-delayed matchup, or a game where the opposition trash talks your offensive coordinator, so you run up the score to defend his honor. I found it rewarding to progress my player by making decisions about how to spend their free time, even if the story is largely forgettable. Once you're through the beginning, most narrative beats are awkward cutscenes where voicemails play over an animation of my character on his phone or through uninteresting text conversations. In the lead-up to a big rivalry game, I even had to play through a puzzling scene where a coach asked me multiple-choice questions about the history of the New York Jets. While I love single-player career-centric modes in sports games, sequences like that leave me scratching my head.

Though I appreciate the new ability to play on defense, I found the most enjoyment in the mode lining up under center as a quarterback. Nothing beats the excitement of calling the right plays, driving down the field, and completing important passes at crucial junctures of the game. While the core experience is enjoyable, Face of the Franchise fumbles due to glaring technical problems. Seemingly broken cutscenes leave characters awkwardly staring after dialogue stops, and some practice minigames fell apart when players didn't appear on the field. However, the worst glitch came in my first game as a linebacker for the Chargers. The Washington Football Team didn't spawn, and instead, I played against a duplicate Chargers team. Glitches are present in other modes but are especially noticeable in Face of the Franchise.

Those looking for more quick-hit experiences still have The Yard, Superstar K.O., and the standard online suite. The Yard adds more challenges to complete thanks to beefed-up campaign missions, plus cross-progression for your Face of the Franchise avatar adds incentive to continue your career in this side-dish mode. While I appreciate the freedom to pour hours into The Yard or Ultimate Team, this year's tweaks do little to entice me to spend more time in these modes.

Despite its several technical issues, the on-the-field action of Madden NFL 22 continues to improve in small ways. However, the upgrades and improvements are largely overshadowed by the game's problems and the series' overall stagnation, making it difficult to recommend for week one.

» **Brian Shea**

7

PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
Stadia • PC

» Concept
Step onto the field once again as your favorite NFL team, but crowds and momentum play a more significant role this time around

» Graphics
When the many technical errors aren't ripping you out of the immersion, Madden NFL 22 looks good. Spectators feel less mechanical thanks to new crowd animations

» Sound
The commentary gets repetitive fast, but the remastered crowds sound great when the momentum is in the home team's favor

» Playability
The core experience is extremely familiar, but gameplay enhancements both subtle and apparent improve the play-by-play action

» Entertainment
The atmosphere enhancements are welcome additions, and the on-the-field action is largely sound, but Madden NFL 22 suffers from technical issues that hold it back

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Twelve Minutes

Stuck in hell

8

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive **Developer** Luis Antonio **Release** August 19 **Rating** M

Xbox Series X/S
Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Fight your way through a time loop, trying to figure out why a man is at your apartment accusing your wife of murder

» Graphics
The top-down perspective and one-apartment setting gives the game a live-stage feel that amplifies the story

» Sound
Great performances by Willem Dafoe, Daisy Ridley, and James McAvoy sell the story's stakes

» Playability
Pointing and clicking around your apartment makes up the majority of Twelve Minutes. It's fun mixing and matching different items to find new results

» Entertainment
Twelve Minutes sinks its claws in from the get-go and doesn't let go until the final, brutal revelation

» Replay Value
Moderate

Getting stuck in a narrative time loop game is a unique sort of hell. On the one hand, being stuck creates a connection between mechanics, story, and player engagement rarely possible in video games; like your protagonist, you're trapped, both caught in a never-ending cycle you are unable to break. On the other hand, the experience can be frustrating when you want nothing more than some shred of progress. So goes Twelve Minutes, a fascinating game that unravels its story 12 minutes at a time.

The beginning of Twelve Minutes is immediately captivating. Arriving home to your small apartment, your wife has made your favorite dessert. It's a special night because, as you sit down to eat, she reveals she's pregnant. You're going to be a father. But then comes a knock at the door. A man claiming to be a police officer accuses your wife of murdering her father eight years ago. He says he's looking for a pocket watch belonging to her father. She insists she didn't do it, but the cop wrestles both of you to the ground. In an act of utter police brutality, he begins choking you, but at the moment of death, you wake up at your front door just a few minutes earlier. The evening continues to repeat itself. What do you do next?

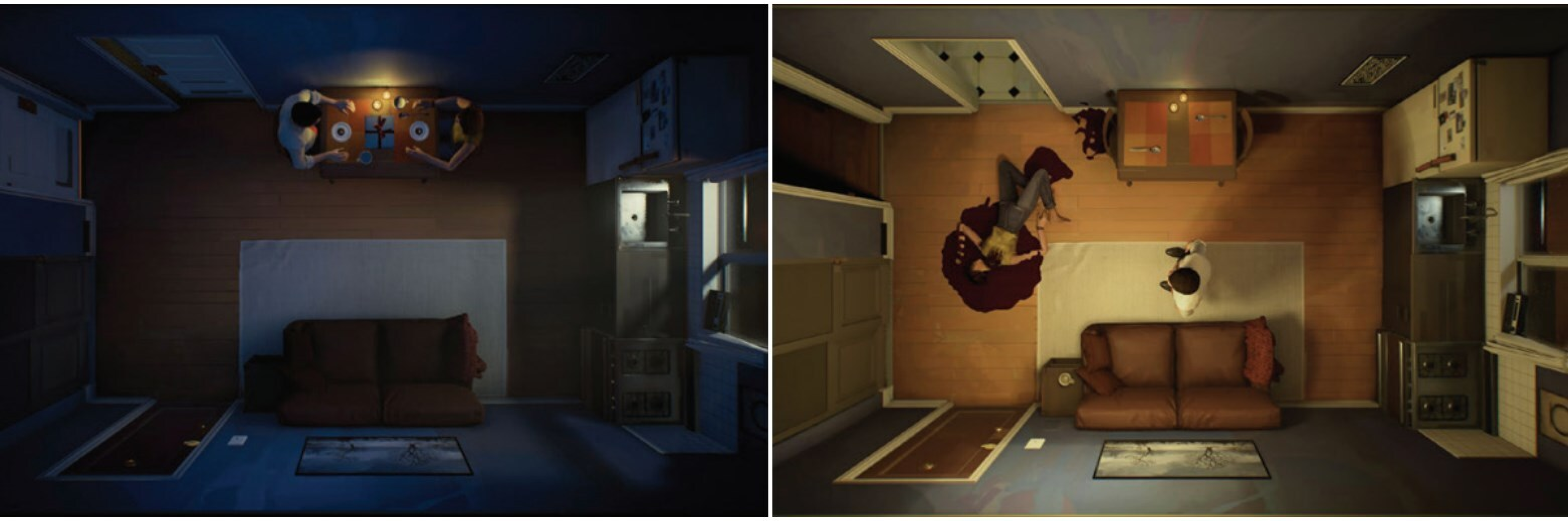
Twelve Minutes is a point-and-click adventure game, and so you point and click your way around the three-room apartment, trying to convince your wife of the time loop, stop the police officer from killing you, and unravel the mystery at your front door. Solid writing and great performances by James McAvoy, Daisy Ridley, and Willem Dafoe carry the game for its roughly six-hour runtime. Dafoe, in particular, plays an excellent and scary villain who's both deadly and aggressive, amplifying your sense of urgency through each loop.

Progress comes down to memorization and experimentation. Memorization works better in the long run. If you can remember the location of each key item in the apartment and the core questions that need answering, you can make solid progress through each run, discovering new revelations as you get better at the puzzle. However, mechanically, the game never goes quite as far as I wanted. My hair-brained schemes and experiments – such as trying to pour a glass of water on the hardwood floor inside the front door to trip the cop – were not recognized by the game. There are very exact solutions to each puzzle, such as show this photograph to this character, and only then can you unlock the dialogue tree you need. The game expects you to figure out these solutions exactly as it wants you to, which can feel limiting when you want to experiment with the environment.

In and of itself, this isn't a bad thing, but when you get stuck, you feel trapped in your own time loop. Each run through the game lasts just over 10 minutes, which feels like a harsh time restriction when you can't decipher your next move. The time limit can be frustrating, and each cycle's repeating dialogue becomes very grating. At one point, I spent over an hour repeatedly going through the loop, trying desperately to find the one thing I missed. Every time I tried to be creative with the game, nothing I did gave me any progress. The whole process was infuriating.

The flip side of this experience is that once I found a solution – almost always through experimenting the way the game wants you to, not the other way around – the payoffs were satisfying. At the root of Twelve Minutes is the question: Can you ever really know someone? No matter how close you are, do you know everything there is to know about a person and their past? It's not the most unique story in the world, but by the time I reached the game's finale, I was hooked. When I saw the last shocking and grotesque twist, I felt like the game had earned its narrative payoffs – despite a few plot holes, such as one character's odd gaps in memory. I'm still not sure where I land on the final revelation, but I commend creator Luis Antonio for genuinely going for it and pulling no punches. I think the ending could potentially rub some players the wrong way, so if you can find necessary trigger warnings without spoiling yourself on the story, it's a good idea.

Twelve Minutes is ambitious, both in its narrative and gameplay. It restricts players to its brutal rules, and its tragedies truly horrified me. And while its gameplay never let me experiment as much as I wanted it to – I still wish my cup of water plan had worked – I can't stop thinking about the experience. I don't want to be trapped in the game's time loop any longer, but the entire adventure will stick with me. Twelve Minutes is a case study on a game thinking outside the box, playing by its own rules, and it's a worthwhile experience for that alone. » **Blake Hester**



The Forgotten City

A narrative masterpiece

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 339

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Dear Villagers **Developer** Modern Storyteller **Release** July 28 **Rating** T

A Roman city resides within a large mountain, hidden from light and prying eyes. Only 23 people call this secret society home, and they appear to live harmoniously together, but looks can be deceiving. Time has taken its toll on each soul, but they can never leave, and more pressing yet, cannot sin, for even the most minor white lie or act of theft will steal the life from everyone. An angry god lords over this cave, and any misgiving will trigger a curse called "The Golden Rule." The offenses of previous generations can be seen across this city – grim reminders not to sin, no matter where you are or what you are doing. These people need your help, and they somehow summon you from 2,000 years into the future.

Equipped with technologies they've never seen before (like a flashlight), you are now a part of their world – a newcomer that these people don't seem to fear or question. But why? The Forgotten City skillfully plays up this mystery through a beautifully penned story loaded with meaningful player choice, making you feel like you are genuinely sculpting your path as the plot unfolds.

The name "The Forgotten City" may seem familiar to Skyrim players, as it's the title of one of that game's most popular mods, downloaded more than 3 million times, and so successful in its storytelling that it won an Australian Writer's Guild award. The creator of that mod is Nick Pearce, and he's taking a second spin with his time-traveling concepts in this excellent standalone game of the same name. While shedding Skyrim's dark fantasy setting for a brighter aesthetic, it still clings tightly to the Elder Scrolls formula. That's perfectly fine, as Pearce and his development team at Modern Storyteller play it like a beloved fiddle to bring the characters, their world, and your exploration within it to life in fascinating ways, even if the tech behind it all feels a little dated.

When you step foot in this hidden Roman world, you'll see it has everything the people need: gardens, water, extravagant homes, yet no way to leave. You arrive via a wormhole and quickly find that your first motivation is to get to know all residents. This task unfolds through extensive conversations that almost always give you numerous questions to ask. Most of The Forgotten City's gameplay consists of conversations. Thanks to the excellent writing, you walk away from most of these chats with a better understanding of the characters, their motivations, and what they may be up to – not to mention being intrigued by the large narrative that unfolds around it. I don't want to give away too much of the plot or mystery at hand, but many conversations initiate quests (both critical path and optional) that you can activate and pursue.

The Golden Rule these people are governed by also applies to you, and you may be tempted to break it from time to time in conversations or as you explore the city. A lie could get you an answer, or you could steal a potion you need to heal someone's illness, but these acts may doom everyone in the process. Doing these things may seem foolish, but here's where things get interesting: As the people lose their lives, you need to race back to the wormhole to reset time. If you make it, you retain the knowledge you've gained and any items you grabbed, but the society resets to square one. You now have information that will help you solve the riddles faster. You can also use the information you learned about people against them, as they are taken aback by the knowledge you are weaponizing.

Time travel is used in awesome ways, and much like the film *Groundhog Day,* you make parts of the same day different each time you reset it. Modern Storyteller knows people won't like redoing the same things over and over and found a few solutions to speed up events that you should be repeating. Depending on how you play your hand, you can reach four different endings. A few come up quickly, but the true ending takes about 10 to 15 hours to reach. I managed to see two of these endings – both were somewhat shocking in their setup but satisfying in how they closed the door for the society and my time traveler.

As the story unfolds, some quests focus intently on a blend of combat and environmental navigation. The combat and jumping mechanics are a little rough (feeling just like Skyrim). Still, these sections remain fun, spin the larger mystery on its head, and above all else, give you a nice break from the conversations at the right times to keep the experience from getting too repetitive.

The Forgotten City does a great job making you feel like a skillful sleuth, pushing you to run across town with sizzling leads. The only downfall to this excitement is some of the more significant moments come up short in visualization. If characters are doing anything other than talking, they often move in strange ways, and the environmental events (like falling debris) are quite janky. You also won't learn much from facial expressions or body language, as characters are all primarily expressionless, yet are thankfully saved by exceptional voice work and writing.» **Andrew Reiner**

9

PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Time travel and player choice are put to excellent use in a thrilling time-traveling story

» Graphics
The Forgotten City's roots stretch back to Skyrim, and it still holds those old-school visual traits in the character animations. The world is beautifully conceived and easy to navigate

» Sound
The voice cast makes up for the robotic character movements and delivers the emotion you need to make determinations. The score fits the mood nicely

» Playability
The writing is so good; you look forward to the long conversations

» Entertainment
One of the better choice-driven games in recent memory that makes you feel like you have ownership over your actions and the narrative flow

» Replay Value
High

Pokémon Unite

A thunder shock to the system

8

Switch

» Concept
Duke it out with your favorite Pocket Monsters in a 5v5 online multiplayer arena

» Graphics
Pokémon are faithfully rendered in 3D, and their ability animations make battles even more satisfying

» Sound
Orchestral horns, bombastic drums, and electric guitars imitate classic battle themes, filling me with nostalgia

» Playability
Certain Pokémon have lower difficulty tiers with approachable mechanics while others provide a high skill ceiling with context-sensitive abilities

» Entertainment
Recognizable Pokémon, distinct move sets, stylish animations, and easy-to-understand objectives make this an excellent introduction to the MOBA genre

» Replay Value
High

Style 10-Player Online Strategy **Publisher** The Pokémon Company **Developer** Tencent Games **Release** July 21 (Switch), September (iOS, Android) **Rating** E

The MOBA genre is a competitive space, as it typically features robust rulesets, requires team cooperation, and has a high skill ceiling that is a hurdle for fledgling players. Newcomers have much to digest, but they're rewarded with loveable characters, strategic battles, and exciting gameplay mechanics if they put in the effort. Pokémon Unite distills the genre's characteristics into an easy-to-understand format and brings its beloved Pocket Monsters into the fold, resulting in a genuinely fun and approachable MOBA, albeit with a flawed microtransaction system.

Unite features battles between two teams of five Pokémon. Each team starts the match on opposite ends of the map after selecting characters, battle items, and stat-boosting held items. You earn experience points by eliminating smaller Pokémon, destroying enemy goal zones, and defeating other players. You unlock new abilities throughout the match, and after enough experience, fully evolve your Pokémon. I'm happy Unite doesn't shake up the mold, because the series' monsters and flashy powers are a natural fit for this format.

Unite features over 20 playable characters, ranging from fan favorites like Pikachu and Venusaur to lesser-known Pokémon like Cramorant and Crustle. The roster includes characters from Red and Blue up to famous monsters from Sword and Shield, though strangely, there isn't a single Pokémon included from the series' second generation, Gold and Silver. Pokémon group themselves into five battle classes: All-Rounder, Attacker, Defender, Speedster, and Supporter; and while they don't have elemental weaknesses like in mainline games, each creature has unique stats, ability trees, and Unite Moves that make them distinct from one another.

Each Pokémon's moveset remains faithful to the franchise but also makes sense in the context of a MOBA, and I love experimenting with different ability loadouts with each Pokémon. Sometimes I pick abilities like Flamethrower and Fire Blast that allow Charizard to be a spellcaster, and in other games, I focus on melee fights by unlocking Fire Punch or Flare Blitz. Charizard's Unite Move, Seismic Slam, is pure spectacle as he jumps into the air and soars above the map, spewing molten flames onto enemies below. At the end of his Unite Move, he picks up the nearest enemy Pokémon and slams them back into the pavement.

The map's paths are populated with goal zones teams must attack or defend by obtaining Aeos Energy, which is collected by defeating wild Pokémon. Then, you slam-dunk that Aeos into enemy goal zones. The Aeos Energy destroys a goal zone after enough has been deposited, opening the next part of the lane. After 10 minutes, the team with the most deposited points wins the match; these short time limits make losses easier to swallow and help to cultivate an online environment that focuses on fun.

Other objectives, like Zapdos, pop up throughout the game. Zapdos, in particular, is incredibly powerful and doesn't spawn until the last two minutes of the game. The Legendary bird rewards the team that successfully defeats it with a huge goal-scoring buff that can potentially change the tide of battle. While I like the catch-up potential that Unite's side objectives bring to the game, there's nothing more frustrating than playing strategically for the majority of a match and losing an objective because a teammate isn't paying attention. But to be fair, that's part of what makes MOBAs so exciting.

Pokémon Unite's microtransaction systems let you purchase a battle pass and fashionable cosmetics for your trainer and Pokémon. This monetization method is standard for free-to-play games; however, Unite drops the ball by allowing players to purchase item enhancers that can level up a Pokémon's held items and boost their stats. Players can obtain these item enhancers for free by simply playing the game, but it takes months to upgrade an item to its level cap. I haven't experienced a real disadvantage playing the game without purchasing microtransactions, but this system's pay-to-win potential certainly diminishes its long-term competitive integrity.

Pokémon Unite is a fun way to spend your time despite these frustrations. The game eats away the hours of my day as I reassuringly say to myself, "Just one more match." Battles highlight the spectacle the Pokémon series is known for, and with so many abilities to pick, no match feels similar to the last. The game's simple mechanics make for an approachable MOBA experience, and with a catalog of nearly 900 Pokémon to pick from, my hopes are high for the future of Pokémon Unite. » **Alex Van Aken**

This review pertains to the Switch version of Pokémon Unite. The game is scheduled to release on iOS and Android in September

Axiom Verge 2

Lost in another world

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Thomas Happ Games **Developer** Thomas Happ Games **Release** August 11 **Rating** T

Thomas Happ's 2015 game Axiom Verge is a triumph of both singular vision and nostalgia, a game of astounding scope, especially considering it was accomplished almost entirely by a single person. That project also earned its reputation as the most Metroid-like game ever released, not bearing the Metroid name. Years later, the sequel is more confident in its strides away from that core inspiration, but it remains no less impressive in size and breadth. Players can anticipate a lengthy and thoughtfully crafted adventure through gear-gated paths and an elaborate science fiction narrative. But, Axiom Verge 2 is also a game that skirts the line between demanding patience and inducing frustration. The pacing lacks some of the big moments that might lend structure and excitement, and the many interconnected corridors begin to blend into a long and confusing blur.

Protagonist Indra Chaudhari is an eccentric billionaire hoping to track down her missing and estranged daughter. Her search takes her to an abandoned Antarctic research station and a cargo elevator that opens into an entirely different world governed by bizarre physics, technology, and history. Only the most fervent followers of Axiom Verge lore will detect the connective tissue to the first game. Still, alternate universes and the nature of consciousness are concepts very much at play. The story flirts with themes of identity and what makes us human, but even with some sophisticated ideas, I was a bit let down by the story. One significant beat early in the plot offers a surprising shift in the narrative and gameplay direction, but much of what follows lacks the revelatory follow-through I hoped to find.

If there's a reason to play, it's to marvel at the immaculate level design and clever upgrades that open new paths for exploration. The character improvements are intriguing, from navigating a remote drone through tiny openings to exploding into a swarm of nanites to knock down a boulder. The most exciting aspect to exploring is the overlay of an entire second world on top of the first, and both have slightly different geometries and upgrades to track down. Puzzles often take advantage of this dual-world dynamic, demanding you think in multiple dimensions. The experience is trippy and often satisfying in its challenge.

New ranged and melee weapons are upgradable for some added kick, and a skills progression system allows further arsenal improvement, health expansion, and more. There's even a hacking tool to upgrade, providing the chance to open particular locked doors or turn aggressive enemy technologies into allies. Even though the upgrades and weapons are fun, the combat never takes off. Individual enemies often feel like nuisances rather than challenges. Scattered across the map are several large optional monsters, but overcoming them rarely demands great skill. And in an unusual twist, given the genre, the game has only a couple of encounters you'd consider bosses and even those lack depth.

The gradual unlocking of Axiom Verge 2's map leads to several enjoyable moments of discovery; many of the hidden paths and locked-away improvements made me smile. Unfortunately, I found those moments of progress and discovery unevenly paced. Just as I began to get in the flow of exploration and the map opening up, I would hit a wall. The massive size of the map, usually a thing I'd celebrate, suddenly became a barrier to my enjoyment as I slowly backtracked through dozens of rooms, looking for a newly opened space. The map is hard to read and contains few clear indicators for blocked paths or the location of unreachable items.

Along with the odd absence of meaningful boss encounters or story beats, the sprawling map gave me a sense of aimlessness and consistent confusion. Without a doubt, some of that vibe is inherent to any game inspired by the likes of Metroid. But here, I found the sensation overwhelming, sometimes taking me out of the otherwise pleasant rhythm of discovery and exploration.

Nonetheless, even when Axiom Verge 2 left me frustrated, I never lost the sense of its intelligent design and mind-bending premise. With these first two games, Happ has laid the groundwork for a particularly weird and captivating fiction, and we've only just scratched the surface of its secrets. While I hope I don't have to wait another six years to play Axiom Verge 3, I'm fascinated enough to have a controller at the ready for its inevitable return. » **Matt Miller**

7.75

PS5 • PS4
Switch • PC

» Concept
Explore an alternate dimension of winding corridors and forgotten technology in this mostly standalone follow-up

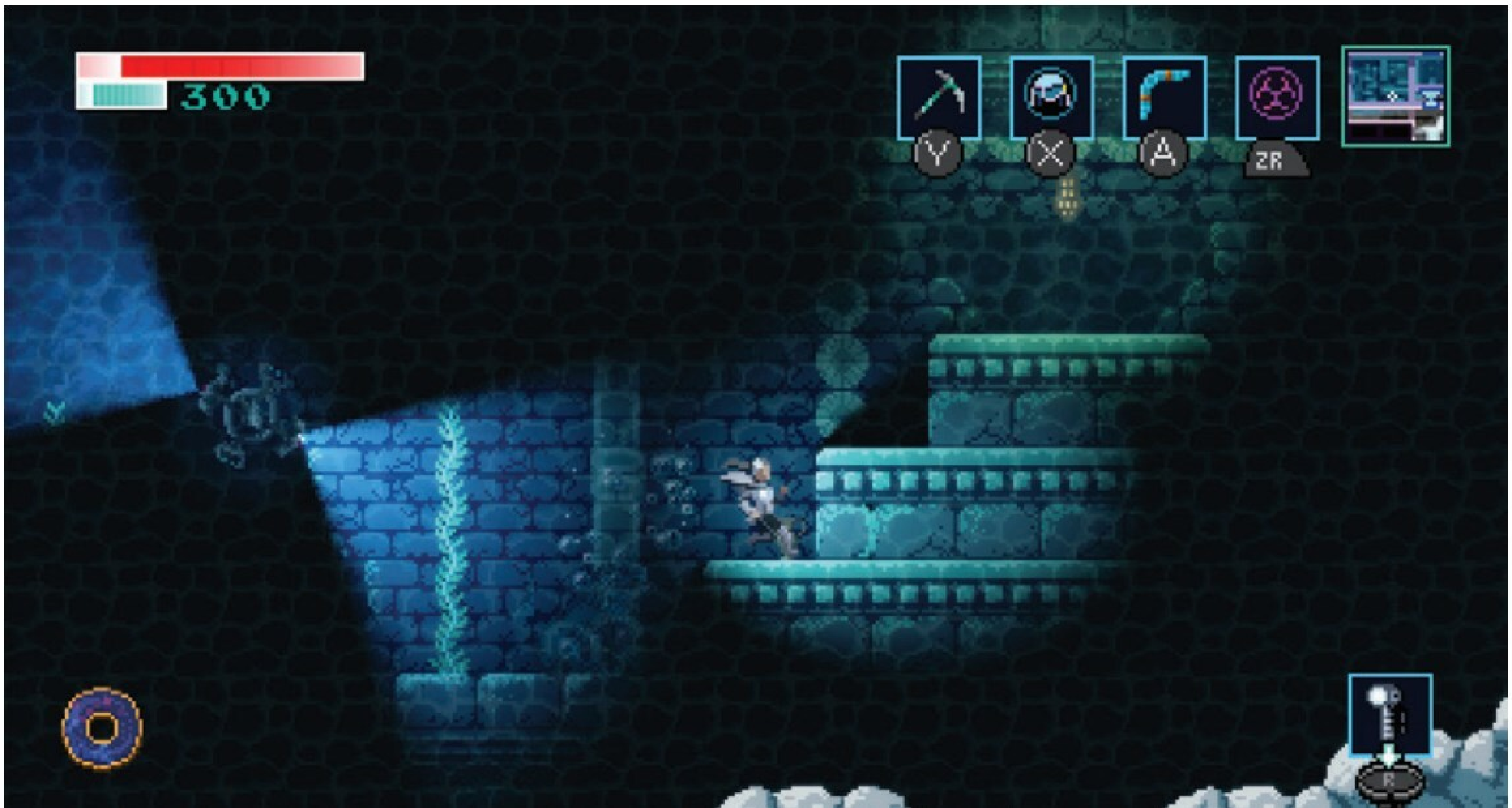
» Graphics
The pixel graphics are evocative and colorful, but that stylistic choice has a cost, especially when trying to read the map

» Sound
The novel soundtrack draws harmonies from various world music traditions while mixing in a healthy dose of punchy synth sounds

» Playability
The ramp-up of new abilities and gear is steady, but a game this focused on exploration needs more tools to manage navigation

» Entertainment
Clever level design and consummate world-building are great fun, even if the pacing and exploration sometimes lead to frustration

» Replay Value
Moderately high



8.25 Eldest Souls

Platform PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
Release July 29 **Rating** T

Eldest Souls is a no-brainer if you already enjoy punishing Souls-like games, but the forgiving health system and honed-in challenge may entice newcomers to brave its dangers. – Marcus Stewart

8 Neo: The World Ends With You

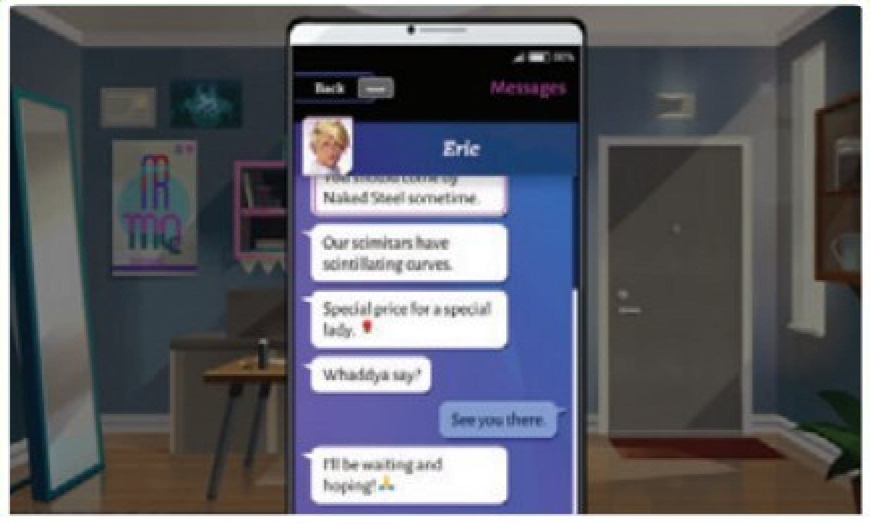
Platform PS4 • Switch • PC **Release** July 27 (PS4, Switch), 2021 (PC) **Rating** T

In some ways, it's disheartening that Neo: The World Ends With You doesn't evolve much from its predecessor. It may even feel like a step back, but there's still a fun game here that I had trouble putting down. – Kimberley Wallace

8.25 The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles

Platform PS4 • Switch • PC **Release** July 27 **Rating** T

The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles is a solid package, retaining the charm and entertainment of previous entries. It's not the series' best, but there's plenty to keep you entertained as you work your way through case after case. – Kimberley Wallace



Eric

Naked Steel sometime.

Our scimitars have scintillating curves.

Special price for a special lady. 🌹

Whaddya say?

See you there.

I'll be waiting and hoping! 🙏

7 Boyfriend Dungeon

Platform Xbox One • Switch • PC **Release** August 11 **Rating** T

Boyfriend Dungeon puts a roguelike spin on the dating sim genre and weaves a compelling storyline with a comedic twist reminiscent of games like Dream Daddy. – Liana Ruppert

7.75 Cris Tales

Platform PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • Stadia • PC **Release** July 20 **Rating** T

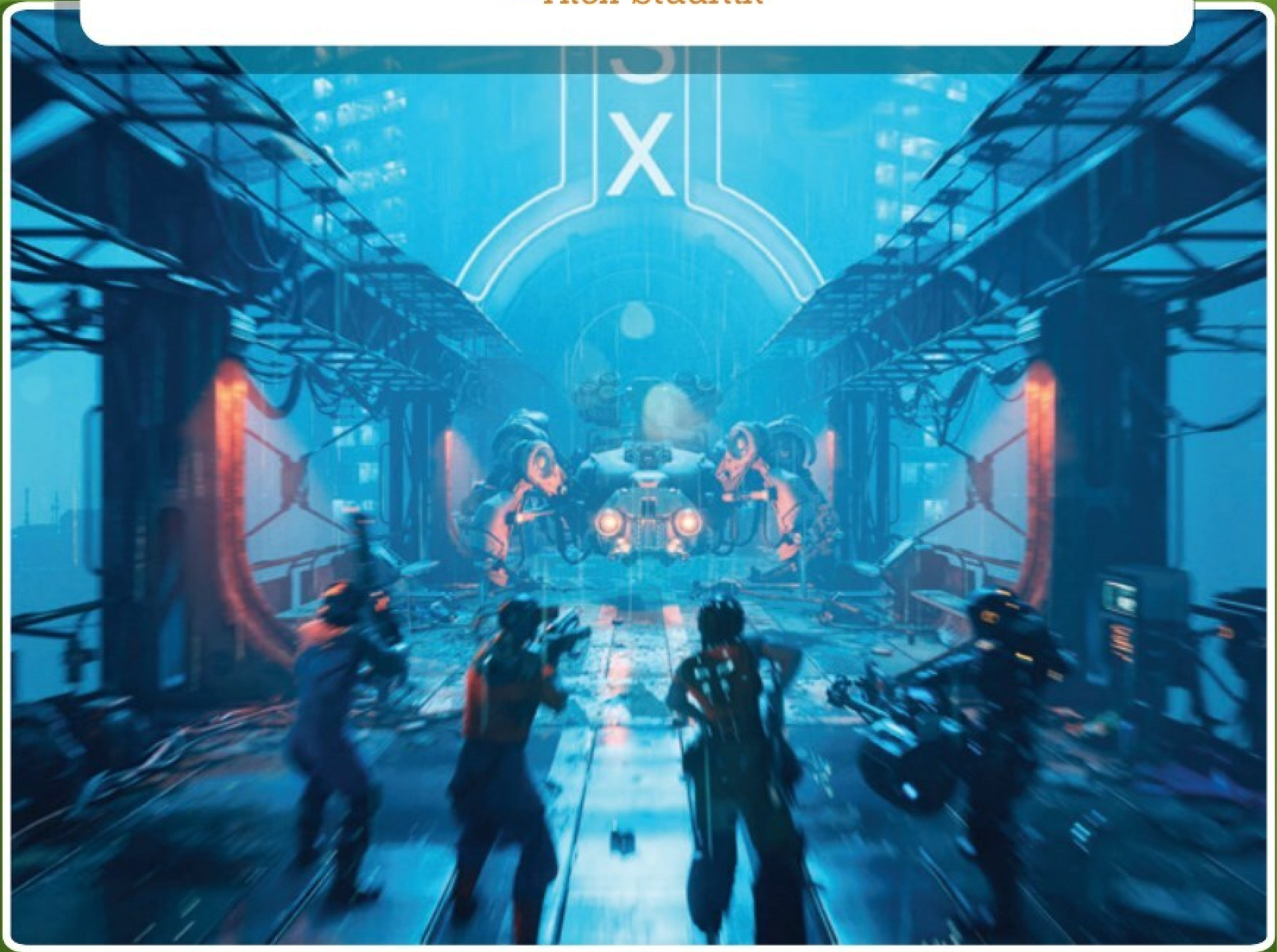
RPG fans still have an enjoyable and often delightful adventure to play. However, with myriad frustrations, repetitive action, and mechanics that don't live up to their potential, Cris Tales falls short of the greatness for which it seemed destined. – Brian Shea

Visit gameinformer.com for the full reviews

7.25 The Ascent

Platform Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC **Release** July 29 **Rating** M

The Ascent has issues, but those issues didn't detract from my overall enjoyment of the game. I won't write my thesis on its commentary on capitalism, but I'll fondly remember my co-op sessions where I tore through this cyberpunk world.
– Alex Stadnik



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Marvel At The Midnight Suns

So what if the new Midnight Suns game is a fresh take on established characters? We can still look back fondly on the games these characters have previously appeared in. Complete the trivia below to see if you're ready to join this dark and gritty new superhero team. ***by Matt Miller***

1. The spelling may be different, but the Midnight Sons appeared as a team-up in Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3: The Black Order. Which of these superheroes would not contribute to the team-up bonus?

- **a.** Doctor Strange
- **b.** Ghost Rider
- **c.** Black Widow
- **d.** Scarlet Witch

2. Two years after his movie's theatrical release, Blade received a licensed game on which two gaming platforms?

- **a.** Game Boy Color and PlayStation
- **b.** Xbox and PC
- **c.** PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X
- **d.** Sega Genesis and Super Nintendo

3. In a particularly incongruous pairing of level and character, Wolverine fought his way through a(n) _______ in his section of the 1992 SNES game called Spider-Man and the X-Men in Arcade's Revenge.

- **a.** knife factory
- **b.** funhouse
- **c.** car dealership
- **d.** art museum

4. Iron Man appeared as an unlockable bonus in this 2003 game.

- **a.** The Simpsons: Hit & Run
- **b.** Need For Speed Underground
- **c.** Hulk
- **d.** Tony Hawk's Underground

5. Doctor Strange cast a spell on his own dedicated Pinball FX table in 2013. Which enemy did he confront with his magical silver orb?

- **a.** Baron Mordo
- **b.** Dormammu
- **c.** Nightmare
- **d.** All of the above

6. Captain America and The Avengers was a big hit for arcades back in 1991. What style of game is it most like?

- **a.** Street Fighter II
- **b.** Gauntlet
- **c.** Contra
- **d.** Final Fight

7. Many individuals have taken up the mantle of the Ghost Rider. Which character starred in the 2007 video game?

- **a.** Johnny Blaze
- **b.** Robbie Reyes
- **c.** Frank Castle
- **d.** Danny Ketch

8. Captain Marvel has a lot to say in her intros of Marvel vs. Capcom Infinite, but which of these is not one of her intro lines?

- **a.** "Can we kick your butt quickly? I've gotta go feed my cat."
- **b.** "I'll fight you guys, but when you lose, you gotta clean up my ship. Deal?"
- **c.** "I've forgotten more about fighting than you'll ever know."
- **d.** "Just when I think I can get a little R & R, you guys show up!"

9. Illyana Rasputin, better known as Magik, appears in X-Men Legends. What was her role in the story?

- **a.** Kidnapped by the Shadow King to lure Professor X to the astral plane
- **b.** Murdered by Juggernaut to set up a revenge plot for Colossus
- **c.** Time travels from the future to warn the X-Men about Magneto
- **d.** Illyana does not appear in X-Men Legends

10. Scarlet Witch has appeared as a supporting character in several comic book games over the years and almost always sporting a distinct color scheme. What is it?

- **a.** This is a tricky one. Maybe blue?
- **b.** It's definitely green.
- **c.** Trick question, she's always in black and white, like in *Wandavision*.
- **d.** Um, it's red. Her name is Scarlet Witch. It's red. ◆

1-2
GREAT LAKES AVENGER
You have trouble taking even yourself seriously

3-4
YOUNG ALLIES
No one remembers your heroics

5-6
DEADPOOL CORPS
You may be awesome, but you're still sort of a joke

7-9
AVENGER
You're in the big leagues, but you might not have the dark cred for this assignment

10
MIDNIGHT SUN
Wear that scowl with pride

ANSWER KEY: 1-C, 2-A, 3-B, 4-D, 5-D, 6-D, 7-A, 8-C, 9-A, 10-D

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